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# Surviving the Reservation

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SURVIVING THE RESERVATION

By

Rochelle Lynn Dale

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2009

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Rochelle Lynn Dale is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### SURVIVING THE RESERVATION

By

Rochelle Lynn Dale

Surviving the Reservation is a look at life on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in western South Dakota. The introduction and the following seven related essays span a twenty –seven year period from the early eighties to present. During the eighties, the author, along with her husband and their first child, lived in Wanblee, a small community in the western part of Pine Ridge. They have continued to be a part of the Wanblee community even though the author and family now live in Marquette County Michigan.

The seven essays cover a wide range of topics. “Eagles now are Coming” describes the setting and gives some historical background of the Oglala Lakota. “In Crazy Horse’s Village” focuses on the lives of three Lakota elders and their ancestry. “The Red Road” explains certain religious ceremonies and profiles one ordinary man who has dedicated his life to helping the people “Other than Humans” is a segmented essay about animals. “Reptile Mind” concerns alcoholism and one man’s road to recovery. “Enduring” tells of the lives of women. The final essay is about miracles and transformations and is called, “We are not Dying.”

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2009

## DEDICATION

To the Memory of  
Jake Little Thunder, Bernard Moves Camp,  
John White, and  
Paul and Arlene Dale

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all the people on Pine Ridge who shared stories with me and who allowed me permission to write and print those stories. In a few instances, at the requests of the individual, I have not included the person's real name. Otherwise, I have tried to reproduce the stories as accurately as possible.

I would also like to thank Dr. Paul Lehmberg for his support, input, and suggestions for this project.

Thank you to my family: my husband Jan for providing a base, or as Nghia says, "the shoulders for me to fly from;" my daughter, Kalil, for her enthusiasm and understanding; my son Ian, for keeping us in his prayers as he studies and forges a new path at the Sivananda Ashram.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



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## INTRODUCTION

I turned fifty recently. And while I don't feel any different than I did at 24, except when I try to keep up with the twenty year olds on the ski hills, the mirrors tell me that whatever I still want to do in life , I better get started. Throughout the past twenty- seven years, I've had the opportunity to visit and live for brief periods of time on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in western South Dakota. I was privileged to be there and to be included in Lakota cultural and religious activities. I was allowed an intimate glimpse into another culture, and these experiences changed my life, my path, and my ideas about responsibilities and obligations.

Pine Ridge was and still is a place of extremes. Summers may bring weeks of one hundred degree days and months of devastating droughts, a sun so hot that fair-skinned cowboys watch their hands blister as they hold the bridle reins. Winters bring winds that blow the snow horizontally across the prairie and create sixty below zero wind chills. But weather is not the only extreme. Conditions on the reservation-- poverty, alcoholism, and lack of education-- often shocked and depressed me. I sometimes sank into periods of apathy and thought that nothing anyone did or ever could do would ever make a difference. Hopelessness. But at the other extreme, the land and the people held me in awe, and twenty-seven years later they still do. The Oglala Lakota are a very traditional people. Their generosity, humor, acceptance of others, and belief in the reality of dreams, visions and a creator define who they are.

I first went to Wanblee, a small community in the north eastern corner of the reservation, in 1982 after finishing my undergraduate studies in Philosophy. I was

preparing to apply to various law schools when I met my future husband, Jan Zender. Jan had been living on Pine Ridge for the past five years. Like me, he had grown up in central Indiana with little Native American ancestry, and he was passionate about learning Native ways and traditions. His passions led him to study religion, predominantly Native American religion, at the University of Montana, under the tutelage of Dr. Joseph Epes Brown, who wrote *The Sacred Pipe*, and who learned about Native traditions from Black Elk, a Lakota elder. There, Jan met and became friends with two men from Pine Ridge, who invited him home to the reservation. The elders of Pine Ridge, satisfied after their initial interrogations of Jan and his intentions, proclaimed, "If you really want to know Indian ways, you'll have to learn the language and live here." So, he accepted their invitation. One of his friends arranged for him to live with the Little Thunder family where he soon became a well liked addition, and was unofficially adopted by Jake, the patriarch of the Little Thunder clan. When Jan and I met, I wasn't planning to fall in love, but these things happen, and so I agreed to return to the reservation with him in the spring. I welcomed the adventure of living within and learning about another culture, a rare opportunity; therefore, I abandoned law school without regret.

My entrance into the Lakota community wasn't free or easy; I would have to pass some tests. For instance, older women teased me with made up stories about Jan and the number of children on the reservation who belonged to him, even though I was pretty sure he didn't have any. They watched and waited for my response. I know now that if I had become angry with Jan or anyone else, if I had not responded with a laugh and a joke, I would have failed, and they would not have welcomed me. At other times, community members watched curiously when I was given traditional foods such as

*taniaka*--intestine soup-- or dog. If I had shown open distaste or repugnance and had been unable to eat my share, I would not have been so readily admitted into the culture.

I became a part of the community, attending various ceremonies, pow wows, and family gatherings. For the next five years, for three to seven months at a time, we lived on the reservation outside of Wanblee. During the time away, we returned to Indiana where we could find easy employment and save enough money to make it through another period of months on Pine Ridge. Jan and I were married in a little town just off the reservation, and two years after my initial introduction to reservation life, a baby was on the way. Our son went to ceremonies, and learned Lakota songs while still in the womb, so that after he finally arrived, he could only be put to sleep with drumming and loud singing. Through regular participation in ceremonies and sweat lodges and through the stories that the people told, I learned about the Lakota's spirituality, faith, and the responsibility they felt for one another. Soon, these ideals became mine.

When we eventually moved away from Wanblee and settled in Marquette County Michigan, I was aware of the loss of a daily focus on sweat lodge, prayer, and ceremonies. I was also aware of my own forgetfulness, and of spiritual laziness. With the busyness of material life and without constant reminders, spirituality was easy to neglect. To compensate, to maintain a certain measure of spiritual discipline, I joined the Catholic Church. The Church's use of rituals and ceremonies, fasts and feasts, incense and holy water, made it seem a reasonable choice, a choice that I could weave into my already existing foundation of Native beliefs and practices.

Although we moved from Pine Ridge, we still keep in touch with our friends there and visit from time to time even though the visits are not as long or as frequent as I might like. However, this past summer, I was to be able to return for a few weeks with my husband and sixteen year old daughter. We were fortunate to be there during the annual Sundance, which afforded us an opportunity to meet new people, make new friends and reconnect with many old ones. One of these old friends, as we watched our daughters talking together at the sweat lodge, reflected on our connected pasts. He believes it was good that we lived in Wanblee and taught our children, Kalil and Ian, traditional Lakota ways. He says that even though they haven't always lived there, they are a part of the community. They have roots on the reservation.

Twenty-seven years ago, I went to Wanblee as a philosopher looking for wisdom and fundamental truths about life. Did I find either? As for wisdom, I suppose I wouldn't be the right one to ask, but perhaps I found some truths: truths about human perseverance, generosity, spirituality, dedication and endurance. Recently, I've been pondering The Parable of the Talents from the Book of Matthew. If the talents are actually gifts, and if my experiences on Pine Ridge are gifts, which I know they are, then I believe it is time for me to share them and not become like the servant who buried his talents in the ground.

I can't say what any of the following essays might mean to anyone else. In my grandest hopes, what I write may be a voice for those who at this moment don't have one. Or I might hope that people, who believe that the poor have only themselves to blame, might change their thinking just a little. Or I might hope that certain historians and anthropologists, who believe that everything good about Indian culture and art is lost,

will have a glimpse into another reality. But most of all, I hope that my stories may be a way for me to say thank you to a people who have shared their lives and culture with me.

## Eagles Now Are Coming

“It does not matter where his body lies, for it is grass, but where his spirit is, it will be good to be.”

### Black Elk speaking about Crazy Horse

The speed limit on interstate 90, which runs east/west, the longest distance through South Dakota, is 75 miles per hour, but most drivers prefer to ignore that limit. After several hours of this high speed travel, while still being passed by loaded pickup trucks with horse trailers and semis headed west, we, my husband, daughter and I, finally turn off the highway at Kadoka, a small town in the southwestern corner of the state. Jan and I were married at the Kadoka court house twenty-five years ago, so we do a quick tour of the town for sixteen year old Kalil's benefit. But she's had the tour before, so doesn't get very excited. Not much has changed. We discover a new restaurant on the edge of town, but today is Sunday, and it's closed already. So is the only grocery store. The two gas stations with the slot machines in the back are the only lively places in town.

Heading south now, we soon come to White River, the boundary between the United States and Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, a sovereign nation and home of the Oglala Sioux. The white clay of the river banks stands out stark and barren, like bleached bones. The river is the lowest I have ever seen it. We've been told that the plains have been suffering from a four year draught. And even though this spring brought abundant rains and the grasses are tall and green, the rivers and lakes have still not recovered. A sign at the river crossing informs travelers that they are now entering the Reservation,

Home of Red Cloud's People. Our destination, though, is Wanblee, technically a part of Pine Ridge, but where the inhabitants are quick to tell you that they are Crazy Horse's people. This band of Lakotas, along with Sitting Bull and his followers, defeated General Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn. They were the last Lakotas to come in to the reservation, and they never signed a treaty.

I am awake and alert now. I watch for herds of antelope or horses or buffalo while I imagine riding full speed on horseback over the mesas. The road winds through sections of badlands, eroded and crumbling soils striped with grays and shades of red. The ravines are full of black currants and choke cherries and dry creek beds. And here, we are haunted by memories and ghosts. This section is notorious for automobile accidents, mostly alcohol related ones where the people, on their way back from town where the purchase of alcohol is legal, tested the contents a little too early and then could not negotiate the curves and high banks. Here too, Anna May Akwash was found, murdered. Her body was several days old. The FBI cut off her hands, presumably to send them in to properly identify the body, an act that outraged the already sensitive Indian community, which had just witnessed the second incident at Wounded Knee in 1973.

We pass through the dangerous section of road and arrive safely in Wanblee. I've heard about the new grocery store, but this is my first time to see it. It even sells hot coffee, pizza and chicken. No beer or wine. Pine Ridge is still alcohol free. Other new additions are street names. Proper green signs embossed with "Moves Camp Drive" or "Cluster Housing Road" now identify the once unnamed streets. There's a new child care center next to the food distribution warehouse, and the little white wooden frame post office has been replaced with a modern brick and glass front building with a regular



gravel parking lot. The old, bald postmaster has also been replaced by a woman with a patient, friendly voice. Wanblee's four churches are still in operation even though the windows are boarded over and the buildings appear to be abandoned, that is except for one, which, with some kind of outside funding, is constructing a very large youth center next to the church. The old log houses, built probably in the 1920s, have mostly disappeared, perhaps gone back to earth, but other than these few changes, Wanblee looks much the same as it did on our last visit four years ago and much the same as when we lived here twenty some years ago.

The community of Wanblee, or at least the Wanblee housing project, was a federally funded program during the 1960s and 70s. The nearly identical, brown and beige or sage green houses are built in a circle, just as traditional Lakota would have set up their tipis. The people who moved here came from their family allotments in the remote areas of the reservation, where they lived in log or small wooden framed houses without electricity, indoor plumbing or running water. They gardened, raised cattle and horses and lived in large family groups. A few of the old traditional ones still lived in wall tents. The housing project, with its modern conveniences, offered an easier way of life, but at the same time, the decision to live there destroyed the family's bond with the land and with each other, and instead, made many of them dependent on the white man's products, even though they had no means with which to purchase the items of their new needs. Even today, Pine Ridge Reservation suffers from unemployment rates over 70%. Wanblee is only 30 miles from two off- reservation towns, Kadoka and Martin, but very few jobs are available there, and the job opportunities that do exist are usually not

available to Indians. The nearest big city, Rapid City, is 90 miles away, not an employment option.

The families that moved into the housing project did so without ever receiving any training or advice on how to maintain a modern house; therefore, in less than twenty years time, the houses became dilapidated, the yards bare except for tossed about children's toys and the ever present windblown dirt. Plumbing pipes clogged and sinks fell into disuse. Or pipes broke and gray water was caught in five gallon buckets and thrown outside when the bucket could hold no more. Even if the residents knew how to fix these things, the tools and parts were expensive, not to mention thirty miles away, and many residents were without reliable transportation. Some houses became infested with cockroaches, which were nearly impossible to exterminate. I remember when Agnus White Mouse, and I'm sure she wasn't the only one employing this method of extermination, would turn the propane oven on high, without the flames, close all the windows and doors, and then leave the house for hours at a time, thus filling the house with gas, killing the roaches with the poisonous, flammable fumes. Agnus was confident of this procedure. Still others, in an effort to be clean and keep the pests away, would zealously mop the linoleum tiled floors daily with excess amounts of water and Pine Sol, which then loosened the glue; consequently, many houses have large squares of missing tiles, more missing than not. Now they mop the subfloor.

Many of the elders who consented to move into the housing project could never really fully adjust or understand the new life style. A story has it that one old man was disgusted by the idea of indoor bathrooms and refused to have them installed. He said, "Why would anyone want to shit in his own house? Not even animals do that." Another

found that the hard wood floors were excellent surfaces on which to split firewood for the wood stove, and when the floor began to splinter and boards loosened, they could be removed and split into fine pieces of kindling.

When Jan and I lived in the Wanblee area in the 1980s, we spent a good deal of time in the town itself, visiting friends, eating dinners, watching an occasional movie. Even though most people survived on government commodities, they never lacked in generosity. The big blue enamel coffee pots were part of every kitchen as well as kettles of soup and maybe fry bread. To be able to share these things with visitors was a source of pride. Still, even then, we had to be careful and avoid people who had been drinking because they would either want something, like a ride to some far off town, or they would be angry at white people in general and would want to pick a fight. Now, on our most recent trip, we spend very little time in town. In fact, we are advised not to go at all if we can avoid it. (Of course we can't.) Friends tell us that gangs have taken over. Children hide brass knuckles in their pockets and carry guns to school. Drugs are prevalent. And since this is not an affluent community, the drugs are cheap and extremely dangerous. The population of Wanblee has doubled in the last 20 years, and so the community is full of young, disgruntled people with limited educations, no jobs, and little hope.

Before the housing projects of the 60s and 70s, most families lived in the country on their old family allotments, leftovers from the General Allotment Act of 1887, which allotted each adult Indian 160 acres of what was already reservation land. Large family groups lived together in a central location on the adults' adjoining allotments. Initially, the Allotment Act was devised to break up tribal unity and tribal ownership, thus avoiding any further uprisings. The government also hoped to turn these Indians into hard

working white farmers by placing a certain amount of acreage in one individual's name. After each adult was allotted 160 acres and each minor 80 acres, the surplus reservation land was then sold to interested white ranchers or business men. Also, after 25 years of these allotments being held in trust, the Indian owners were issued a deed, which meant then that they could legally sell the land to anyone; many Indians were cajoled , swindled and duped into selling their land to whites, which is why still today the reservations are dotted with nonnative owned ranches. Historian, Oliver La Farge, in his book *A Pictorial History of the American Indians*, points out that before the Allotment Act, reservations throughout the country totaled 155,000,000 acres, but by the time President Roosevelt finally put a stop to these land sales in 1933, the reservations had dwindled to 47,000,000 acres.

Even though the Allotment Act was designed to turn nomadic hunters into stationary farmers, as well as break tribal unity, the large family groups, or *Tiyospayes*, remained intact, that is until the housing projects. By the 1960s most Indians had been in school, watched television and basically knew or surmised how the rest of the country, or at least middle to upper class whites, lived. The Indians lived in rural areas where water had to be carried in buckets from the creek to the house, and firewood, the only source of heat, was cut with a double bit axe. So, when the government offered new houses with running water, heat and electricity, most adults took the opportunity, without realizing the probable consequences: boredom and the degeneration of finely tuned skills and bodies. Living in town meant no more gardening or husbandry and little or no gathering of wild foods. Horse training, breaking or riding became obsolete. And without these kinds of activities, coupled with the lack of nutritional foods and the subsequent reliance on

government foods, obesity, diabetes, heart disease and alcoholism became the norm.

Now, in an effort to reverse this trend, many families, including the Moves Camps, have moved back to the country, to the old allotments. Richard, who is the great grandson of Chips, the holy man of Crazy Horse's camp, lives with his wife and six children in the same place as his grandfather. Like Chips, Richard is a spiritual leader, and so this place has become a refuge for many people. This is the place where Jan and I once lived and where we now return with our daughter Kalil.

As we leave the town of Wanblee and drive the final eight miles to our destination, Eagle Nest Butte looms large to the south. Wanblee, or Wanbli, as it was spelled originally, means "eagle" in Lakota, and the town gets its name from this almost unnatural looking phenomenon where the eagles actually do nest year after year. This butte is the anchor of the community. Its long rectangular shape erupts from the miles of flattened surrounding plains like a child's drawing. Someone told me once to always remember where I am in relation to the butte, so that if I'm ever lost, I just need to look for the butte and walk in the proper direction. It is the highest outcropping in the area, a sacred place where people go to pray and fast.

We turn off the dirt road to Hisle and Martin and away from the butte, cross the cattle guard and the nearly dried up creek where the Moves Camps' thirty some horses, of which only three can be ridden, come for water, and in another mile arrive at our long time friend's house. I am always anxious at this juncture, wondering, who will be there, what has changed, and whether the children will remember me. As we all climb out of the truck, Mary leads a pack of young women down the stairs of the front porch. After she hugs us all tight, she points out each of the daughters, and I am thankful for this

reintroduction, since I haven't seen them in four years, and they are all grown up now. Each of the five daughters, one of them my goddaughter, hug us all in turn. Since this is also a spiritual center, other people are gathered around the sweat lodge, mostly men and old friends of Jan's, but also a woman I haven't seen in twenty years. The reunion is a happy one, but before dark, I must drive still a little farther, just over the hill, to set up our tents, where we will stay for the next few weeks.

When I first arrived here in 1982, I felt that Jan had misrepresented the environment I would be living in. I didn't see the magnificence he described. Instead, I saw only the vast emptiness, the dried up grasslands, little matchbook houses stuck here and there in the middle of it all. No shade. Just wind, dust, and summertime heat. That was until I drove to the top of the hill on the Moves Camp property, where a person's long distance vision is limited only by individual eye sight. From this spot, Bernard Moves Camp's original allotment, I can see the Bear Creek valley, the interlacing network of pine and choke cherry filled ravines, and the Dylan Reserve, a southern portion of the Badlands bordering the Badland's National Park. Just below the eroded edge of this hill, on the flat, we lived in a tipi for several years, and although the tipi has long since rotted, we camp in this same place whenever we return for visits.

I scramble down the still visible path and find the sunken remains of our tipi fire pit and decide to put our tent over in the trees instead of on the old site. I smile to think about all the nights I slept here, the strange and surprising occurrences, for instance the night of Kitty Moves Camp when I was four to five months pregnant, alone in the dark tipi, trying to sleep, but the mice wouldn't allow it. They ran incessantly around the tipi between the liner and the outer cover, and every now and then one brave mouse would

dart out to run across my ground level bed. My patience nearly exhausted, I broke into tears and wondered how I would ever solve this problem, and then, from seemingly out of nowhere, in walked a young cat, later to be known as Kitty Moves Camp, my hero. Kitty Moves Camp lived with us for the next few weeks, until the young girl who had lost him out the window of her truck as they were pulling away from the sweat lodge that night, asked for him back. Even though the kitty lived with someone else, he remained a frequent and welcome visitor to our tipi.

This land is many things. Hot and cold. Harsh yet beautiful. Arid, and then the deluge. A place where pet Chihuahuas wear pink fur trimmed dresses to birthday parties, and neighbors are cut with machetes in drunken fights. In the early evening, the sun is still hot and I walk through the waist high grass, my shoes filling with grass seeds. The grasshoppers jump ahead. I watch for snakes, rattlers or blue racers, and hope to get close to one of those birds who sings like a wind-up toy, who makes me laugh every time the song begins. And then there is the wind that never stops. I find that lightning has split the old pine tree on top of the hill so that now it lies broken and decaying on the ground, no longer marking the grave of the twin babies buried there long ago. I never heard them crying at night, although others claim they have. The sweat lodge in the pines still stands, the lodge where the leaders of the American Indian Movement (AIM) came to pray before one of the members, after many years of exile, turned himself in to the federal government. The roof is sagging on the vacant log house, and rattle snakes have moved in under the steps. The outhouse is on its side, blown over by a stormy west wind.

I wait for the cool of the evening, when the sun drops down behind the Ponderosa pines, like a giant splash of orange water color behind green spots. The land lies vast before me, and I imagine the hills speckled with buffalo under tonight's full moon. From close by, the night hawk calls in flight. Wild turkeys gather to roost in the adjacent ravine, and in the distance, back at the Moves Camp house, I hear the young people drumming, practicing some of the same Sun Dance songs that we once practiced here in front of the tipi:

*Leci Wanbli Galeshka wau*

*Ukta ki yo piko*

*Wanna he yelo. Wanna he yelo.*

*In this place, the spotted eagles*

*Are coming*

*Now they are here. Now they are here.*



## In Crazy Horse's Village

"I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow? So many other men have lived and shall live that story, to be grass upon the hills. It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit." -Black Elk-

If a culture is to maintain its traditions, then it must look to its elders. And when that culture is based primarily in oral traditions, then the stories told by and about the old folks and the lessons we learn simply from the way they lived their lives are especially important. During my stay on Pine Ridge, I came to know some of these elders. They remembered the old ways, spent their young years living in tents, and riding wild horses. They knew their ancestry from the days when they still hunted buffalo, and they passed on to their families and to their tribe not only ancient knowledge and wisdom but also pride in their people. They were able to maintain this pride, dignity, spiritual awareness and hope even though living conditions on the reservation were often dismal. While these old ones retained the wisdom of the old ways, they adapted to the new, and their stories, their lives, impacted everyone in the Wanblee community including me.

Jake Little Thunder is my adopted father-in-law. He was born in 1912, so when I first met him in 1982, he was already seventy years old. Jake had suffered a stroke a few years before, but even so he was mentally sharp and always up to date on the most recent news. His white hair and hearing aids gave away his age as well as his walk, which was

stiff and bow legged like he had just come down off his horse. Because he had been divorced since 1957 and had only sons and grandsons, his comportment with women was rusty and unpracticed. On our first meeting, he awkwardly wrapped his arms around me as a welcome, and in doing so, and in simply talking to me, Jake was breaking with tradition. Lakota men did not talk to their daughters-in-law.

We sat at an old yellow Formica kitchen table on unmatched chairs that we rounded up from other parts of the house. The table might have been in a dining room, but no one used dining rooms here. So, the table became part of the living room where the only other additions were a sunken, brown couch and a TV that received only two channels. More than half of the living room linoleum floor tiles were missing, and cut out newspaper pictures and articles decorated the walls. Jake directed Jan and me to the kitchen to make some coffee for ourselves and some tea for him. Cockroaches walked out of the cabinets and helped themselves to granules of sugar spilled on the counter. Since there were no cups, we drank out of red plastic cereal bowls.

Jake lived in a three bedroom house with his oldest son, the son's wife and their four boys. These were the constant residents. Sometimes, Jake's brother, John, stayed there too if he was sick or there was no firewood to heat the old log house out in their country allotment. When Jan first came to Wanblee, he stayed there as well and slept on the couch at nights. Other relatives came and went depending on their circumstances, but always, children of varying ages ran around the house. In the summer the younger ones wore nothing but sagging diapers on their bottoms and dirt on their bellies. When the children got too loud for Jake to hear our conversation, he growled at them in a loud and

menacing voice. They stopped and looked at him, were quiet for a minute or two, but then quickly went back to their previous games.

As we drank our coffee and Jake drank the peppermint tea made from the plants that we had picked along the creek, he talked about medicinal herbs. He loved plants, loved to talk about them, collect them, and drink their teas. Along with tribal politics, plant lore, including the diagnosis and treatment of his and other's illnesses, was one of his passions. He and his brother John spent days hiking on the family allotment by Fish Creek, looking for just the right plants. He taught the knowledge of plants to those who cared to know, including his nephew, who continues the tradition on the old homestead. Now that Jake is gone, the plants speak to the nephew in dreams, so that he knows which ones to pick and how to use them. Instead of coffee, Jake drank wild peppermint teas, June berry leaf tea, or *Waphe Hota*, and when in his late eighties and nineties his age prevented him from wandering the hills in search of his own teas and medicines, he treasured the gifts of plants that others brought.

Jake didn't write about his plants in his nine page typed autobiography, but he did write briefly about boarding school, which he attended off and on from 1921 to 1930. He never talked about his school experiences, but he was proud to be able to write and receive letters. His letters were carefully crafted, often handwritten in pencil. He saved the letters he received in a trunk in his room or else hung them on the wall along with his grandchildren's "A" school assignments.

Often in Lakota society, the grandparents take responsibility for the oldest grandchildren, and Jake was no exception; his oldest grandson, who was then about eight

years old, was with him almost always. When he drove his old beat up car out to the country for a sweat or ceremony, Grandson came too. He played in the dirt, made miniature sweat lodges and miniature pretend fires, or visited with Jan in the tipi, while Jake visited with the other old men. Jan remembers staying up all night with a worried Jake when Grandson was little and sick with a fever. The old man kept watch and Jan kept him company.

Because of injuries from horses when he was a young man and from the stroke later on, Jake suffered significant hearing loss and wore old fashioned hearing aids that connected to a control box that he carried in his shirt pocket. He frequently adjusted the dial in order to accommodate the different pitches in voice. He loved talking to older men the best because they had deeper voices, because they yelled, and because they would talk politics: national, state and tribal. Jake had served for many years as a tribal council man, so he was well versed in the political details of the time.

As an elder and a tribal council man, Jake was a respected community member and a kind of chief. He delivered the speeches and often the prayers at public gatherings, pow wows and dinners. He came from a long line of chiefs. At the Battle of the Blue Water, in September of 1855, the chief of the village attacked by US cavalry was Little Thunder, one of Jake's great grandfathers. I knew some of this history from Jake, but from reading *Crazy Horse* by Mari Sandoz, I gained still a better understanding of the Blue Water incident. According to her, Little Thunder was known as a man of peace. He maintained order and discouraged the Sioux warriors from waging an all out war on the whites after the shooting of Conquering Bear. Everyone, including the Army officers knew this about Little Thunder. So when the new Indian agent ordered all the peaceful

Indians to move south of the Platte River so that there would be no mistaking them, Little Thunder believed this was unnecessary, especially since his people had just completed a successful hunt and the meat was drying on the racks and the hides were ready to tan. However, the soldiers came, looking for revenge for the death of Officer Gratton. They demanded that Little Thunder turn in the guilty ones, but even if he had been inclined to do so, they were already gone. The soldiers, though, would not take no for an answer. They opened fire under the white flag of the Indians. One hundred men, women and children, half of the camp, were killed that day. Little Thunder was shot, but he survived. A young boy, a member of the camp, had been out capturing horses that day, and as he neared the camp, he saw the smoke from the burning lodges and then found the bodies. This young man was Crazy Horse.

Crazy Horse, as most people already know, went on to become a great warrior and leader. When most other bands had already gone onto the reservations, Crazy Horse and his band remained free for as long as they could. Among this group was Chips, a medicine man who protected the young warrior. Descendents tell stories of how Chips provided Crazy Horse with a certain talisman that made him bullet proof in battle. By other means provided by Chips, Crazy Horse was exempt from all bodily harm from his white enemies. Chips was Bernard Moves Camp's great grandfather.

Like Jake, Bernard took care of grandchildren, but a granddaughter instead of son. His bedroom in the government house in Wanblee was just off the kitchen, and while his wife, Esther, prepared breakfast, Bernard sat in his opened bedroom on his bed with his granddaughter. Every morning after the early morning feeding, his son brought her to him. Then the baby's parents could get a little more sleep while grandpa, who was awake

anyway, took care of the baby. Sometimes, he held her and bounced on the side of the bed and sang. Sometimes, she would lie on the bed next to him while he drummed on a round rawhide hand drum and sang. If she wasn't feeling well, he carried her in his arms and walked back and forth for hours and sang cheerful lullabies in Lakota, "Cheslea mina, Cheslea mina." ( Baby poop smell. Baby poop smell.)When immunization shots resulted in a much too high fever, he stayed awake and kept watch through the night. This little granddaughter is nearly thirty years old now in 2008, and people still like to tease her about never learning to crawl because she was always held.

As a child, Bernard lived outside of the settlement on a creek with his parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles. He remembered taking food to his elderly grandfather, Horn Chips, who still lived in a tipi and who would not eat any food that came from white men. He would eat only from wooden bowls, not from plates or plastic dishes, and he refused to use modern utensils such as forks. When the buffalo were gone, the hide tipis started to disappear as well. Tents were then made from canvas but canvas had to be bought and paid for. So, with decreasing availability of materials from which to construct a lodge, Bernard's first home with a new wife was a wall tent. To make a living, he cut cedar trees during the summers down in the breezeless ravines, and sold the wood for fence posts, one dollar a post. He hastily built a log barn for tools and horse feed, but for many years, it became a home for him and his family. Eventually, when the housing projects came about in the 60's and 70s, Bernard moved into one of the new government houses in Wanblee.

Although he lived in a modern house, he never became a modern man. He preferred boiled meats rather than pastas and pastries, wild *timpisilas* rather than potatoes,

and pounded choke cherries made into *wojape* rather than any other dessert. Even when he could no longer pick his own choke cherries, he bought five gallon buckets full for five dollars a bucket from some of the young teens. He and his wife would pound the cherries, pits and all, with rocks. And when the pits were smashed fine enough, the fruits were ready either for cooking or drying for winter storage. They would shape the pounded cherries into thin patties and place them on a rack in the sun out of reach of children and dogs. Bernard had a long iron bar that he used to dig *timpsilas*. The starchy root bulbs of the wild prairie plant, have long thin tails that grow two to three feet down into the earth for moisture, and the digger must be very careful not to break this tail, otherwise, the *timpsila* cannot be braided and dried. The sharp blades of a shovel would cut the tails, so Bernard worked the iron bar like a post hole digger and gently dislodged the long root. The *timpsila* bulb is cooked in soups like potatoes or turnips, eaten raw when fresh, or chewed on by teething babies when dried. Bernard liked to see the two and three foot *timpisila* braids hanging in his room, and when his granddaughter was old enough, he would break off one of the bulbs and offer it, instead of candy, to her.

Although he spent many hours gathering plants and food, Bernard's stories were about horses. For my benefit, he tried to tell the stories in English, but he didn't always know all of the words, so the stories were always a mix of two languages. But with the few Lakota words that I knew and with Bernard's hand language, I understood. When he talked, one hand became the horse, the other the rider. The gait and speed of the horse's gallop, the twists and intensity of the horse's bucks, the exact moment the rider fell and the degree of pain were all obvious from the hand motions and a few sound effects.

Horses that bucked were good horses. A horse that lacked spirit was no prize. When Bernard was a boy, he and his brothers rode the seven miles into town to school on horseback. In order to train a wild horse, Bernard's dad made him ride it to school. His two brothers rode on either side of him and whenever the horse bucked enough to make Bernard off balance, one of the boys grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and pulled him back upright. Once to school, the boys hobbled the horses so that they could move about to eat but not wander too far. Then they would repeat the procedure for the ride home.

Bernard was tall and thin, slightly bow legged. His hands and fingers were strong and long like a pianist's. He wore cowboy boots, a straw cowboy hat in summer and a felt one in winter, cowboy shirts with snaps down the front and on the pockets and blue jeans with a leather belt and cowboy belt buckle. On special occasions, he wore a fully beaded buckle, one with some traditional design. Even while he methodically chopped the wood for the sweat lodge fire with his double bit axe, cutting the wood and filling the truck by hand while his two young companions fussed with a worn out chain saw, he dressed as a cowboy.

By the time I met Bernard in the early 80s, he had already given up riding because of injuries, diabetes, and age. But I could tell by the way he watched the younger riders, by the smile on his face if the horse bucked or if the rider and galloping horse came to a sudden halt in a cloud of dust, by the way his eyes gleamed when he told horse stories, that he was connected to the spirit of these horses.

As well as telling horse stories, Bernard sang, not just for his grandchildren but also for the sweat lodges and ceremonies. He knew all the traditional songs from his



grandfather and great grandfather and so always led the singing. He sang the songs in the old fashioned way, and his voice was like the voices of coyotes or night hawks. The melodies were raspy and intense, sure of themselves, confident in their meanings and message. I learned a few of these songs as I listened outside the door of the men's sweat lodge, but his son and grandchildren know them all. The songs are not lost.

Old Guy Dull Knife was a singer too. In the mornings, he would lie on his bed in the log home that he built himself, and tap the beat with his hand on the log walls of his bedroom and sing Sun Dance songs. Old Guy was old. By the time he died, in his nineties, he had almost lived in three centuries. His paternal ancestors were Cheyenne and a part of the tribe friendly with Crazy Horse. Even though the old Chief Dull Knife did not fight with Crazy Horse at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, some of the younger warriors did. Eventually, the Dull Knife tribe was convinced to go to Oklahoma with the promise of land and peace, but the government once again reneged and the Indians were left with nothing but malaria. They decided to return north, a trek that cost many lives. Those who survived came into the Red Cloud Agency in Pine Ridge in April 1877. Crazy Horse and his people came in May after the last of the buffalo were gone and the people were starving.

The Dull Knives stayed on Pine Ridge. Old Guy's grandfather lived to tell stories of Crazy Horse, and his father married a woman from Crazy Horse's village. According to Joe Starita in *The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge*, Old Guy's father was fifteen at the time of the Wounded Knee Massacre, and from his home near Kyle, several miles away, he could hear the guns in the west.

Although Old Guy grew up with stories of battles, starvations and massacres, he worked for peace by singing the songs at Sun Dances and by carving the pipestone pipes for the dancers or for those going on *hanblecheya*. He carved the stone without power tools. And to drill the holes for the tobacco and pipe stem, he used a screwdriver that he twisted in his hands. The smoke channels in the pipe stems were not drilled but rather burned with a red hot wire, heated in the fire. He made head roaches , a hair ornament worn by dancers, out of hair from deer tails and porcupine guard hairs, and he made his own wood and rawhide drums.

He never quite caught on to modern technology. On a trip in an old car that either used or leaked so much oil that the driver needed to check it every hour, Old Guy suggested that they just quit checking. When the gas gauge didn't work, he thought he might be able to see down into the tank if he used his lighter. And when they stopped at a fast food restaurant and ordered hamburgers from the drive through intercom, he wondered how someone could fit in that little box.

He was at home and happy in the country, where he would lie in the grass or the dirt, wherever he was, whenever he felt tired. He ate greasy meat with his hands and then wiped the oils in his hair. "It's good for it," he'd say. And even though he was an old man, he liked to talk about women, and he worried about what he would do when his *susu* no longer stood up. But when he was serious, he talked about the importance of *hanblecheya* and how through fasting one could learn to understand the trees talking and the wind. He said the birds knew everything, even the future, and that if we worked to understand, they would tell us.

At the Sun Dance in the summer of 2008, we told stories about Old Guy to his grandchildren. He would be happy that he can still make them laugh.

These old ones are gone now. Old Guy lived to be in his mid to upper nineties, and while in a nursing home in Colorado where he moved to be close to his son, he was interviewed by Joe Starita who wrote and published a book called *The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge A Lakota Odyssey*. Jake lived to be the oldest person in Wanblee. Well into his nineties, he remained in the Wanblee house with his grandchildren and their spouses. The whole community came out for his wake and funeral, and his body was carried in a horse drawn wagon to a hand dug grave in the cemetery on the hill overlooking the town. Bernard is buried in a small family plot, on the land where he grew up, where his granddaughters and grandson still live, and the horse herd still roams.

Last summer, I stood on the hill inside the wooden fence where Bernard is buried. There was no carefully manicured lawn, no flowers. Instead, prairie grass grew over his grave, and the wind blew and bent the grass sideways. I remembered the days when we shared cowboy stories and compared our injuries. I remembered the way he talked with his hands, and the sound of his voice. And while I thought these things, his grandchildren, five granddaughters and a grandson, Sun Danced and prayed in the traditional way just a mile over the hill.

## The Red Road

“What we have is not a religion but a way of life.”

Freddie Sitting Up – Lakota Elder

When the drumming begins inside the ceremony house, the barking and howling of dogs begins outside. “They can see the spirits coming,” my friend reminds me. I think back on that first year I was here, twenty-seven years ago, fresh out of college with a degree in Philosophy, looking for truth but with the proof to go along with it. And so considering myself an agnostic at best, I spent that first summer trying to understand the different ceremonies, the *Yuwipi*, the Sun Dance, the sweat lodge and *hanblecheya*. I had to find out if the things I was told were really possible and the stories true.

I was told that the spirits made the gourds rattle and the sparks ignite, and that they gave the holy man the words to say during the *Yuwipi* ceremony. So, in the darkened, sweet- grass- permeated room of the ceremony house, with blankets over the windows, in total blackness, when the drumming startled the silence, slowly at first and then picking up speed, and when the men’s voices flew out of their throats like ravens calling, when the gourds rattled about the room, up and down, hitting the floor with emphatic thuds, and sparks, like those that come from striking a flint and steel, sporadically ignited, I watched and listened.

In the following months, I conceded that the information was true. The *Yuwipi* is a Lakota healing ceremony passed down from many generations. Many people come here,

or to other medicine men or women scattered throughout the reservation, to ask for help in fighting disease, curing or finding the cause for ailments or problems such as the inability to conceive a child. One man came to halt the degeneration of his quickly failing eyesight. He put on ceremonies for four nights in a row and followed the prescribed advice. Others came to find ways to offset the insidious effects of diabetes or to ask for help to battle alcoholism. That summer and in the following years, I saw many people come and ask for help for many different problems. I attended their ceremonies and marveled at the respect with which the rituals were performed. I scrutinized the activities and determined that no human could be making the gourds move or the sparks ignite. No human could have moved about those crowded, blackened rooms with the such agility. They would certainly have tripped over someone's legs and feet or on the kettles of soup and boxes of fry bread in the middle of the floor. I trusted the words of the elders, and came to believe what I had been told.

Eleven years ago, I went back to Pine Ridge to ask for a ceremony for my brother. I had watched and helped many people in the past carry out the rituals and preparations, but now I would be the one. First, I explained to the holy man, while we sat around the fire at the sweat lodges, why I sought help. I told him that my brother's cancer had spread, and that he wasn't responding to any treatments. I offered the medicine man a red pipestone pipe filled with tobacco and red willow bark. He smoked it thoughtfully and silently, handed it back to me, and said that we should be ready in four days.

The preparations for a *Yuwipi* ceremony are complex, but I had help. Not only were my husband and children there to support me, but Freddie Sitting Up and Melvin Bad Hand, friends from the community, were there as well. While I cut the black, red,

yellow and white cotton cloth, the colors that represent the four cardinal directions, into two inch squares, placed a pinch of tobacco in the center and then tied over 400 of these tobacco ties on one continuous string, Freddie told me about his sister's illness. Without telling me directly, I knew he understood and cared about my brother and me.

Melvin speaks an English that is often difficult to understand at first. He grew up in a remote area of the reservation in a two room house without electricity with his aunt and eight other people. They heated the small house with wood that they cut with an axe and hauled by horse and wagon. They hung blankets from the rafters at night to separate the individual sleeping quarters. He had trouble in school because he didn't understand the language. He preferred to speak Lakota and still does. So he said little on that day of ceremony preparations, but was ready to hike off with Jan to search for and cut the necessary branches for the ceremony altar. Each branch represented one of the four directions, and from its top we tied the corresponding colored flag: black for west, red for north, yellow-- east, and white-- south. Melvin, Jan and Ian gathered the rocks and wood for the sweat lodge, and since I would also need to provide food for everyone attending the ceremony, Melvin offered his wife's expertise in making the fry bread, an offer I readily accepted. I would make the *wojapi*, a thickened fruit dessert; coffee or fresh peppermint tea; and a meat soup. While buffalo was often preferred or a dog was occasionally cooked because of its special relationship to ceremonial life, beef would be acceptable.

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Melvin, who is short, about 5'7", muscular, darker than most Native Americans and walks poised with his back straight, shoulders high and chest out, attends almost every *Yuwipi* ceremony. He is not a medicine man, but a much needed helper. He helps to prepare the altar, sets the cans of gopher dirt that hold the sticks and flags in the right place, and just before the lights are turned out, he wraps the holy man from head to toe in a hand sewn star quilt, leaving only a small opening from which to breath. He ties the quilt in place with a leather rope, and with the help of another man, they gently lay the holy man face down on a bed of sage on the floor.

In the *Yuwipi* ceremony, the medicine man intercedes on behalf of the supplicant, the one who is "putting on the ceremony." He is the interlocutor to the spirit world. In a closed room in absolute darkness, he suffers, while the supplicants pray and ask for guidance. The spirits talk to the tied one, and he interprets, accurately relaying what he has learned and prescribing the methods of healing if any are possible. The ceremony includes prescribed time for prayer and time for the spirits to respond, as well as times for drumming and singing. Melvin sings loudly and enthusiastically, although perhaps off key, on the men's side of the room.

After the lights are turned back on, and the pipe is passed around, Melvin passes out the water and then the food, all the while ignoring, or trying to at least, the teasing that he receives, the stories told about him in order to make others laugh.

"You know if someone is having a ceremony and he asks Melvin for help, he has to do it," explains our holy man.

"Oh huh," the people say, collectively acknowledging their understanding.

“Some old ones came for ceremony and they wanted to cook a dog in the traditional way, so they asked Melvin to do it for them, but he doesn’t like to kill animals, especially little puppies.”

“Ohoh.” A collective indication for the story teller to go on.

“So Melvin put a rope around this little puppy’s neck because, remember, the dogs have to be choked so the spirit can’t get out. Then he tied one end to the tree branch, and set the dog up in the tree. He went off a little ways and called, ‘here puppy, puppy. ‘The dog got all excited and jumped, hung himself, committed suicide. “

Everyone laughs at this preposterous image, and Melvin, who has been quiet all along, can no longer resist. “I did not,” he protests as if he is afraid that we might actually believe the story, but because of his protest, we are left to wander if there might be some thread of truth in the tale after all. Until everyone has finished eating, the story tellers continue, each one trying to outdo the other in hilarity. Sometimes, the news that the spirits bring isn’t all good. We may learn for instance that death is close, and at those times, we need the laughter.

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On our recent trip to Pine Ridge during the summer of 2008, my husband Jan and I visit Melvin and his wife and daughter in their house in the Wanblee housing project. The small house is crowded with furniture, odds and ends, fading photographs and a sewing machine on the kitchen table where both Melvin and Marti, his wife, make star quilts for people to use during fasting or to give away at memorial dinners or other occasions. A movable basketball goal stands in the middle of the dining room. Melvin explains that he



won it from a contest at the local store, first thing he'd ever won, but he can't put it outside in the driveway where it belongs because it would soon be stolen. He brings us tea and we visit in the living room while his eight year old daughter brushes his almost shoulder length, graying black hair, and adorns it with pink and blue hair barrettes. He stops her play only when she tries to paint his lips with red lipstick. She reminds me of my own daughter, who at that age also adorned her father's thinning hair with little plastic barrettes which were then forgotten until the cashier at the hardware store remarked about his unusual hair do.

For the past several days, Melvin has been entertaining us, especially our daughter Kalil, with made up stories, each one more preposterous than the next, of how Jan and I met. Melvin is seldom serious, but today, he is. I've asked him to tell me what he thinks is important about life on the reservation or what he would like others to know. He doesn't hesitate. "The children," he says. "We must remember that *wakanjala*, the Lakota word for children, also means sacred beings."

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Every morning after the purification sweat lodges at dawn, the Sun Dancers are led out into the dance circle by a young girl. At sundown she leads them back out again for the sweat lodge ceremony and then much needed rest and sleep. For now, this is Melvin's daughter. Melvin is one of the dancers and has been for the last twenty-three years. Friends and family tease him about all the scars from Sun- dance piercing, telling him that he'll have to quit soon because he doesn't have any place left to pierce.

Now, the Sun dance is an annual, open ceremony, but it hasn't always been so. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the commissioner to the US Indian agents issued an order forbidding all Indian activities, more explicitly, all ceremonial gatherings. Government agents were scared and nervous about such large gatherings. They claimed that these dances promoted antigovernment sentiments and immoral behavior. They spread the news and images of Sun Dance piercings and claimed that the Indians, for their own good, must stop this kind of self mutilation. The public readily agreed, and the 1904 Indian Regulations were easily passed. Indian agents in each reservation throughout the country were then ordered to suppress all Indian activities. Sun Dances, *Yuwipi* ceremonies, sweat lodge ceremonies and even fasting or *hanblecheya* could no longer be openly practiced. Ceremonies had to be conducted in secret. Instead of seeking a vision on top of the highest butte the traditional way, the man or woman had to hide in the ravines. They dug small caves or pits into the side of badlands dirt and clay, the remains of which can still be seen. Sweat lodge fires had to be made from nearly smokeless wood so that the fire could not be seen from a distance. The *Yuwipi* was hidden and not talked about. Sun Dances were almost lost or forgotten.

By the time the ban was finally lifted, fifty-five years later, in 1959, many of the ceremonial practices were nearly forgotten. The Indians struggled to regain what they had lost. And even though the ban was lifted, not until 1978 with the signing of the Freedom of Indian Religion Act, were they given the freedom to worship on any traditional sacred ground. Until 1978, sacred sites in the Black Hills as well as Eagle Nest Butte and any leased reservation lands were inaccessible. With this act, the government officially

recognized the validity of Indian ceremonies and sacred places. They no longer had to hide.

Now, the Sundance takes place when the moon is full in midsummer, when the days are long and hot. Dancers commit from one to four days of dancing, fasting, and praying. They dance without shoes on the stubbly dry grass, without hats to shade their faces, without food, and without water, except during the two sweats of the day. The reasons that people promise to do this are varied. Some dance for a relative's health, or for their own. Others dance for the people, the tribe, that they may survive.

Before the actual dance begins, the dancers cut a living aspen tree and stand it upright in an awaiting hole in the middle of the dance circle. From near the top of this tree, which is about fifty feet tall, the male dancers tie individual ropes from which later in the ceremony they will attach the free end to four or five inch peeled sticks slid under the dancers' skin through two, half inch precisely cut slits on their chests, two slits on each side of the chest. As the blood streams down and dries, the dancer goes back and forth to the tree four times, and on that fourth time back, he lunges backwards on the ropes, tearing the skin, and breaking free. His body, blood, skin an offering. A prayer.

As I get older, I may be getting more emotional or more sensitive to other's pain. Sometimes someone has trouble breaking free. He pulls back on that fourth time and the skin stretches until I think it's not possible to stretch more, but still the skin doesn't tear, and he goes to the tree another time. When he comes back again, fellow dancers will grab his shoulders and pull with him, the force so great when the skin finally snaps that they all fall on the ground. I am most sympathetic for the little, skinny guys, the ones who run

back on that fourth time with all the speed they can muster running backwards, only to be bounced back forward almost falling. Some bigger men must assist, add their weight, on the next try back. I can no longer watch without crying.

By the fourth day, the dancers are worn and tired. Some limp from puncture wounds on the bottom of their feet. Some have muscle cramps and must be carried out of the dance circle. They are sunburned. Their lips are cracked and bleeding, and I watch my friend Laura lick her lips over and over again, but her mouth is dry. Still, she keeps focused and looks up toward the sun. A dancer once said that he had never felt his prayers so strong and so clear as during this ceremony. When I look at Laura's face, I can see that.

Melvin and a young man from the community have been told in ceremonies that they must each pull the buffalo skulls this year. Seven skulls are lined up, tied together and then attached to the puller by two piercing sticks on the back of his shoulders. Each pulls the skulls four times around the dance circle, and on the last time around, the other dancers sit on the skulls, adding sufficient weight so that they can't be moved. Melvin and the young man strain, and break free, again tearing the skin so the sticks come out. The skulls represent the people, and Melvin and his friend express their willingness to carry them.

On our visit last summer, Melvin tells us about Sun Dancing. He admits that things have changed over the years. He must constantly remind people of procedure and expected manners, like the removal of eye glasses, earrings, or anything metal before entering the Sun Dance circle. Sometimes he thinks that the dances are not as strict as

they used to be. For instance, because of diabetes and other health issues, the dancers drink medicinal teas during the breaks and evenings instead of adhering to complete abstinence, but in any case he says, “We still starve.” He goes on to tell us about a drinking and driving experience, a vision, and the path that led him to Sun Dancing and a spiritual life.

“A friend and I were driving back from Rosebud. We’d been drinking, and we wrecked the car. Nobody was hurt, so we started walking. I saw these two twins along the road, but my friend told me they weren’t real, so we kept walking until we came to a butte. There was an old man sitting like he would sit in a sweat lodge. He looked at me and told me to do something for the people, but he didn’t say what or for how long.”

“Later that summer while sleeping at my Aunties’, I dreamed about thunders, and I asked my Aunties what it meant. They took me to Richard’s, and I started Sundancing that next year. I’ve been dancing ever since.”

Melvin laughs about the old man who told him to do something for the people but omitted to tell him for how long. For this reason, he doesn’t know when it’s ok to quit or if it ever will be. Since he started Sun Dancing and attending ceremonies and sweat lodges, Melvin has been alcohol free. He married, which some people liked to joke would never happen. A few years after their marriage, a relative asked them to take responsibility for her infant daughter. Marti and Melvin accepted. Dominique is eight now. Sometimes Melvin is dad, and sometimes he’s Melvin. As we visit, Dominique shows me a scrap book from her head start days (preschool years). On one page, the

children were asked, “Who’s your hero?” While some students named super heroes like Batman or Spiderman, Dominique answered,” Melvin.”

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I’ve known Melvin for those twenty-three years that he’s Sun Danced, but I’ve known his mother longer. Erma, who raised Boo Boo, Jan’s friend and Melvin’s cousin, is one of the women who introduced me to the sweat lodge ceremony. Almost every evening for the past twenty to thirty years, two or three carloads of men and women show up for sweat baths. Depending on the size of the lodge, 21 to 48 rocks are heated in the middle of a pyramidal fire. When the fire burns down to low flames and coals, the rocks are ready. We crawl on our hands and knees through the small opening or door of the lodge, and say a prayer to all our relatives as we enter. The lodge itself is made with bent saplings, spaced about 18 inches apart, and woven together across the top, forming a round wigwam type structure about 8 or 10 ft. in diameter and 4 ft tall. This is then covered with heavy pieces of canvas and blankets to both keep the heat in and keep the light out. When we are all inside, the door keeper carries the glowing rocks into the lodge with a pitch fork and places them in the center pit. The door is shut, leaving us in total darkness except for the illuminating red of the rocks. The leader, usually one of the elders who knows all the songs, pours water on the rocks and starts the singing. At first, the steam takes my breath away, and the heat makes me squirm. I try to cover my skin with my towel. The heat and steam feel more intense than that of a sauna because we are all so close, sitting cross legged on the ground inches from the rocks. If we are not singing, then someone prays out loud. In this way, we share the worries and concerns of each other. During the sweat lodge, our bodies are purified both through the consumption

of fresh water and by the release of unwanted toxins as we sweat. At the same time, our minds are purified through suffering and by concentration in prayer and song.

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In the summer of 2008, as we pack for our trip to Pine Ridge, our sixteen year old daughter, Kalil, says, “I think I should go fasting this year.”

Jan and I look at one another, thinking, but saying nothing for what Kalil takes to be too long.

“Well don’t you want me to?”

“Yes. Yes,” we both say at once.

“Then why are you acting like I shouldn’t?”

We haven’t been to Pine Ridge in four years, and we realize that Kalil is unaware of the preparations involved. Fasting or *hanblecheya*, seeking a vision is the most personal or individual of ceremonies. To go “on the hill” as it is also called, one must take a sweat bath for at least four days in a row, gather special rocks and paint them for the going out and coming back sweats, gather appropriate sticks to represent the four directions, special dirt, tie over 400 tobacco ties and make or purchase a new blanket. Additionally, women must make a new cotton dress. All of which will be given away once the ceremony is over. After the necessary preparations, one goes out alone to a prearranged spot, and stays for the allotted number of days and nights, usually one to four. While there, he or she can neither eat nor drink. She stays awake as much as possible, concentrates and prays. Maybe if she is lucky, she will receive a vision or learn

something new about life or herself, or learn a new song or even a new ceremony. The one on the hill leaves the material world behind.

We explain to Kalil about all the needed preparations and advise her to wait until next year. She agrees, and in the mean time, we ask Marti and Melvin to make a star quilt for her. I find it fitting that Melvin and Marti , who helped me years ago with the ceremony for my brother, will now be helping my daughter. They make their living this way, sewing quilts, cooking fry bread for families who must put on a dinner or a wake, a memorial, or a naming ceremony. People who live outside the Wanblee community, but who come here for religious purposes, often ask Melvin to help with preparations. Sometimes, they give him presents.

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Melvin is now 46 years old. He attends the Lakota community college, but not all of the necessary classes are offered at the Wanblee center, so he hitch hikes forty miles to Kyle or Martin and usually gets to class on time. He needs only one more class to finish his Bachelor's degree in Lakota studies. Jan asks him what he plans to do with his degree, and Melvin laughs. We all know the answer. He says that he just did it to show the young people that even an old guy can learn new things.

He tells us one more thing about his daughter. He believes that she came to him for a reason. He is sure that in a different life, she was a Sun Dancer who was perhaps unable to fulfill his obligations. For this reason, she commits to leading the dancers in and out for four years, making the first cuts on the Sundance tree, and walking with it the many miles in the heat of the South Dakota day to the Dance grounds.



Jan will be making a pipe, which is necessary for every ceremony, for Kalil to use during *hanblecheya*. The pipe was brought to the Lakota people by a woman during times of starvation and death. She told them how to use it and how to keep it. She told them that as long as they used this pipe and kept this tradition, the people would live. The pipestone quarry in Pipestone, Minnesota is the site of an ancient battle, from which the blood soaked the ground, seeped into the cracks and created this pipestone. The blood of the people. Whoever uses the pipe in a sacred way and follows these ceremonies, walks the red road. Our daughters, mine and Jan's, Melvin and Marti's, will become a part of the people on this road. Our job is to help them stay there.

## Other than Humans

“Let a man decide upon his favorite animal and make a study of it-- let him learn to understand its sounds and motions. The animals want to communicate with man, but *Wakan Tanka* does not intend they shall do so directly--man must do the greater part in securing an understanding.”

-Brave Buffalo, early 20<sup>th</sup> century-

I knew this one: An Indian woman found a mouse in her sewing basket, and instead of killing it or throwing it out, she let it stay. When the tribe moved to another camp, the mouse came too, carried still in the sewing basket. After many of these moves, the woman was awakened one night by the mouse whispering in her ear. “Enemies are coming. Wake up. Enemies are coming. Wake up.” The woman then warned the others in camp; thus, they were prepared when the enemies came.

I opened the lid to the wooden box inside the tipi where I kept the dishes and pots and pans, and a mouse scurried away, but as I pulled out the bowls for the evening meal, I discovered the beginnings of a little round nest made from the dried grasses. By my standards, this wasn't an appropriate place to raise a mouse family, so I gently gathered the nesting material, making sure to keep it all intact, and moved it to a more suitable spot underneath the root of large red pine.

The next morning, the nest and mouse were back. We repeated the same routine, but this time I tried harder to find the right mouse spot for a nest. I even made a roof for her with bark from a dead tree. Still, the next day, she and the nest were back again.

After a few more unsuccessful attempts, I gave up. I moved the dishes out of the box and let her move in. From then on, when I opened the lid, she didn't run, but sat and looked, with big unblinking mouse eyes, at me. A few days later, the babies were born. I counted them in their nest and watched as the mother nursed them.

\*

I drove the Ford Fiesta, while Jan dangled a large, dead porcupine by the hind foot out the passenger window. We planned to pluck the quills, dye them, and use them to make quilled medicine wheels and to decorate leather bags and moccasins. It was late at night. I drove slowly, and according to the tribal police, I was weaving. The porcupine out the window was explanation enough, however, for this policeman. Everyone knows that good quills are hard to find, so the officer laughed and followed us for the remaining few miles to our driveway to make sure we arrived safely.

Sometimes, if I'm very observant and extremely lucky, I will see Porcupine sitting at the top of a tree, usually hemlock or pine, swaying on tiny branches that seem much too small to hold his rounded weight. Dr. Joseph Brown, religious studies professor and author of *The Sacred Pipe*, once said that as you look at a porcupine in the tree tops, its quills are like the rays of the sun; therefore, when an artist decorates an item with porcupine quills, the quill worker "traps the sun."

Although porcupines, like mice, are rodents, porcupines never scurry. Instead, they waddle and take their time. When we came home late at night to find a porcupine rustling around the inside of the tipi, we were surprised at his lack of concern. His round black eyes, the size of peas, peered at us for a brief moment, as if to ask, "What the hell

are you doing here?” Then, apparently undisturbed, he sauntered on, continuing his investigation of the cooking and food storage area. He refused to use the door when he was ready to leave, and we were forced to unstack one side of the tipi and roll up the cover so that the porcupine could leave in the direction he wanted to.

I often come in contact with Porcupine in the northern woods as well as the Dakota plains. On occasion, Porcupine visits my front porch while the three cats sit by and watch. He likes to come in the middle of the night making a noise that sounds like the panting of an exhausted dog. Gradually, as we become more and more awake, it occurs to us that what we hear is chewing, a porcupine happily chewing on the end of a house log. Because we were surprised by that first visit, we yelled and frightened him away, but two weeks later, he returned to chew on the same log. This time we explained to porcupine the problems that his new habit would cause, and reminded him that he did have an entire forest of trees where he could exercise his teeth. He slowly climbed down from the porch and walked away. He hasn't come back.

\*

An old man had no cat; instead, he had a bull snake that lived in the walls of his house. The man did nothing to encourage the bull snake to find new lodging; in fact, he liked him there. Like the bull snake in Edward Abbey's, "Serpents of Paradise," this one did indeed keep the mice under control, but it also kept other types of snakes, particularly rattlers, away. Bull snakes and rattlers, like the Sioux and the Crow Indians, have always been favorite enemies. Thus, I was often advised to catch a bull snake and keep it in the outhouse. Everyone would feel safer.

I preferred Kitty Moves Camp's company to that of a snake. Cats, I knew, were not just useful for keeping the mice away, but also for keeping the snakes at bay. I had watched a batch of kittens gingerly sneak up behind a snake that their mother had brought them and then pounce precisely at its neck. They killed it and ate it. Also, Kitty Moves Camp liked the fire. He kept me company while I cooked over the outside pit. I sat cross legged on the ground while Kitty Moves Camp sprawled a few feet away, asleep on his back with his four legs and feet splayed limp, looking like a dead animal ready to be skinned and put in the skillet.

\*

Little Girl Dog wasn't my dog. She wasn't anybody's dog. She just hung around, attached herself to us. She wasn't pretty or even nice to pet. She was medium sized, a scrawny 30 pounds maybe, with thin and coarse hair, but I liked having a dog around, and so I saved the little bits of table scraps for her. An elderly couple, who lived in town, saved their table scraps in a metal two gallon bucket and brought it out for her about once a week. In the meantime, she hunted. At first, when I saw her jump above the tall grass and then pounce, I assumed she was hunting mice or gophers like I had seen coyotes do on wild life TV programs, but since her hunt wasn't disturbed by my watchful curiosity, I discovered that she hunted and devoured grasshoppers. Lots of them.

By fall, I knew Little Girl Dog was pregnant, but then she disappeared. I didn't look for her because I didn't know where to start, and then one afternoon, as Jan and I walked through a nearby ravine in search of particular plants for ceremonies, she bounded up to my side. "Where did you come from?" I asked her and at the same time noticed a 10 -12 inch diameter hole in the side of the ravine, what I imagined a coyote

den might look like. Little Girl seemed excited , but let me have a peek down the four foot deep hole at the pile of moving flesh before she crawled back in.

Weeks later, we arrived home to our tipi late in the night. The moon was new, so the dark was complete. We didn't own a flashlight, but we could feel the path to the lodge with our feet even if we couldn't see it. On this night, as we stooped through the door, we heard noises, little whines and grunts, coming from the back of the lodge. We anxiously lit the match and candle and found puppies, eight of them, in the middle of our bed. Little Girl Dog was back.

\*

In the days when humans remembered how to listen to animals, a two legged travelled with a dog friend. The human being became seriously ill. Survival was questionable. The dog stopped and spoke directly: "Sacrifice me and you will live."

The cold rains of November had begun, and we wandered daily in the ravines cutting wood with a double bit axe and hauling it on our shoulders back to the tipi where we would rekindle the fire in the middle of the lodge, warm our hands and coffee and dry our soaking clothes. Che'bu, our husky, malamute friend, liked to visit and stay with us in our tipi. He returned from firewood cutting wet to his ears instead of his waist like Jan and me. He sat on my side of the fire, next to me, and his fur steamed as the heat evaporated the moisture from his coat. He sat straight, as if listening to our conversation, but soon his eyes closed and then his head sagged to one side, but he caught it and jerked himself back upright, and opened his eyes, like a dozing old man or young child embarrassed to have fallen asleep in the middle of the story. Each time, his head drooped

farther, but still he tried to maintain his attention and posture. I wondered at his persistence and his sense of being a part of a circle around the fire with humans.

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“That rancher who shot your dogs- we’ll shoot some of his cattle.”

When we returned to the Reservation after a winter of work in Indiana, Little Girl Dog was gone. A rancher claimed she was chasing cattle, and he shot her, just as he had shot Che’bu the previous season. The puppies were gone too, except for one who looked like her mother but who was wild and couldn’t be touched. The others had been given away or else didn’t survive. When the scrap bucket came, the wild one watched and made a wide circle around the perimeter, waiting for all humans to retreat before she would come near. I too kept my distance and watched, but gradually we narrowed the space. Each day she let me in a little closer and in a few months time, I could touch her, but to everyone else, she was still wild. I wanted to keep her, have her be just mine, but she disappeared too. We found her later, rotting, under our friend’s trailer where she died from the rancher’s bullet.

\*

Old Guy Dull Knife looked out the window of his log home at the birds flying by. He said the birds know everything, the past and the future. They are willing to tell us but it’s up to us to understand them. Swallows tell us of impending storms, ravens of weather changes. The white owl, when it appears in Wanblee, warns of impending death of some community member. In their role as messengers, the angels are like birds, and for that

reason are painted with wings. The human spirit, in its capacity to fly from one realm to another at the times of birth and death, becomes at once like a bird and an angel.

\*

When we were children, my older sister, and I, pleaded with our dad to let us have a horse. He countered: "Horses chase cattle. They paw, tromp and ruin the fences." Even so, we eventually got our horse, a middle aged Palomino with bad habits. She deliberately crashed her riders into low tree limbs or scraped their legs along the barbed wire fence, but never me. She knew I was too young.

In buffalo hunting days, the Indians rode horses without the use of bridles and bits, and yet the horses performed. They knew what to do. Rider spoke with his mind, and horse understood. Sometimes horse spoke with her mind, and rider agreed.

Jan was given a horse, a spotted Appaloosa stallion, green broke, which meant that on calm days, an experienced rider could ride him. We didn't own a horse trailer, so the only way to get the gift horse home was to ride him the twelve miles from town. Grasshoppers were plentiful that year, and as they rode along in the dry grass beside the road, whenever a grasshopper ascended in flight and its wings buzzed and vibrated, the horse jumped sideways, threw his head back, and rolled his eyes so that only the whites were showing. Each time, Jan pressed his knees a little tighter and held the reins with a firmer grip, ready to hang on to the reins, no matter what. They travelled at a slow trot, when suddenly the horse stopped and stood perfectly still. At first, Jan wondered what new trick the horse was devising, when he heard a rhythmic, slow rattle. He followed the horse's eyes and watched the rattle snake wind its way through the grass and in between



the horse's front hooves. When the snake was safely away, the horse resumed the journey, the rider confident now in the horse's sense of danger and sense of humor.

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The horses came to visit at the tipi in the early morning hours before we were awake. They liked to rummage around the outdoor fire pit, step on pots if they were in the trail, rub noses with Kitty Moves Camp if he was visiting too.

As the storms approached, the progression of eastward moving blue black clouds almost calculable, the horses ran from hill to hill across the plains and then stopped on the highest hill and faced the west. Bucking, whinnying, manes and tails flying in the wind, they ushered in and welcomed the beings from the west. According to the old folks, "They danced for the Thunders."

The Bureau of Indian Affairs asked one of the Indian elders what he would do with the land if he regained control of the lease. Would he grow wheat? Raise livestock? The Indian answered: "I will sit on a hill and watch the grasses grow, and I will watch the horses run and dance. "

## Reptile Mind

“If a man loses anything and goes back and looks carefully for it, he will find it.”

Sitting Bull

Josh broke into the Moves Camp house, found the hand gun and the bullets hidden in the bedroom dresser, walked back outside, loaded the gun, and fired down the hill at the man whose party he had just been attending. When the tribal police caught up with Josh, who by then was walking the two miles down a dirt road back to his camp, he noticed, for the first time, the gun in his hand. Luckily, his aim hadn't been good.

The unemployment rate on Pine Ridge, which hovers around eighty-five percent, is not the only crippling fact of life on the reservation; while statistics indicate that approximately eight out of ten families are affected by alcoholism, I suggest that the number is too low. If by family we include cousins, aunts and uncles, and if by effect we mean that someone's life is influenced by alcohol in some way, then that number should be ten out of ten families. No one who lives a lifetime on the reservation can be unaffected. According to current statistics, life expectancy on the reservation is forty-eight for men and fifty-two for women. Deaths from alcohol related automobile accidents contribute to this tragic low life span as well as deaths from “systems failure.” When a person abuses alcohol for too many years, his or her body shuts down. Kidneys, heart, liver all fail at once. Each time I return to Pine Ridge, I find that another acquaintance has died from “systems failure.” Often, the victim is only thirty-five to forty-five years old.

When my husband, Jan, asked how long his adopted sister -in- law had been drinking, his friend answered, “Always.”

“How is that possible?” he asked.

His friend explained that as a baby, she crawled around the room, unnoticed by the drinking adults, and finished the sips of beer left in the bottom of the cans.

A little boy, neglected by drinking parents and relatives, proudly proclaimed that he wanted to grow up to be a drug dealer. “Why a drug dealer?” Jan asked. The boy answered, “Because then I could eat every day. I would always have money to buy food.”

When the monthly lease, social security or disability payments come, alcohol cravings force the drinkers into town at the first opportunity. They indeed buy food, but also large amounts of liquor, and often start in on the bottles before returning home; in such cases, the food never makes it to the refrigerator. Instead, it rots in the hot trunks of cars, maybe for days while the children wait. The drunks drink until they pass out, and when they wake, they start drinking again to cure the hangover. They drink for days until the liquor or the money run out.

In this state of mind, what Josh now calls “the reptile mind,” people do things that they don’t remember, things that they wouldn’t ordinarily do. One woman broke a crutch over her step- father’s head after he repeatedly called her a bastard. As head wounds do, the blood gushed and had to be stopped by handfuls of tobacco, while the woman had to be forcefully restrained from hitting him again. “No one calls me a bastard,” she calmly said.

Another woman threatened to walk into the drug dealer's house and shoot her husband. She had to be disarmed by her cousin as she waved the pistol from the back seat of the car.

In a rundown cabin with only a dirt floor, story has it that a woman prematurely and perhaps unknowingly gave birth to her youngest daughter. The baby was rescued from the floor by someone less drunk than the mother. He cut the umbilical cord, and nestled the baby in a shoe box. She survived.

That same baby, at ten years old, sat in the back of a pickup in my husband's arms after he and his friend rescued her and the rest of her family after their car had hit a cow in the road. Jan said that the girl's body went limp and he couldn't detect breathing. He thought his little friend had died, but when they arrived at the clinic the nurse said, "No, she's not dead. She's passed out. Drunk."

The family survived the car accident, but no one stopped drinking. Some years later, the mother died an early death at the hands of a close friend. In a drunken argument, he repeatedly sliced at her with a machete.

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Although we had kept in touch by phone or email, I hadn't seen Josh since he had stayed in the log cabin by our tipi, the years before the gun incident, 1985 and 86. In my mind then, he was still twenty years old, with curly, wild black hair that he tried to smooth with the palms of his hands. He walked like a bear, slowly but with deliberation, shoulders and head a little hunched in case the ceiling suddenly became too low and he needed to stoop. He was mostly quiet, with a subtle and often times slow sense of humor. Sometimes, he

got a joke minutes after the punch line, and then he would smile and laugh both at the joke and himself. "Oh I get it," he would say after the rest of us had already had our chuckle, which would provide another laugh, this one, at Josh's expense, but he didn't mind. He worked hard, and he didn't mess around. When some of the other young men went to pow wows to snag girls, Josh stayed behind. He was in Wanblee to Sun Dance and to help prepare the grounds, and he took his promise and obligations seriously.

On rainy days, Jan, Josh, Ian, and I sat in the tipi together. Ian was only six to seven months old and had just learned to crawl. While Jan and Josh leaned back on their elbows on either side of the ground level bed, Ian crawled back and forth between them. He was perhaps the first white baby that Josh had much contact with. He marveled at Ian's pinkish white, almost translucent skin in which the veins showed from just under the surface. He couldn't quit thinking about the blood in those veins, so he always called Ian hemoglobin.

After shooting at his neighbor, Josh left the reservation for many years, but now, he is back again in the homeland of his ancestors. He lives in a trailer with his wife and two daughters on ten acres that he leases from the tribe. Across the road, about a mile away, is the little town of Porcupine, where from his living room window, Josh can see the cemetery where his grandfathers and mother are buried. He invites us to come for a visit and stay for as long as we want. He is eager to show us his homestead. Josh is much as I remember him only now the black hair is half grey, and his two hundred pound frame has added a few more pounds. He walks more than ever like a bear, and his sense of humor is unscathed. We introduce our daughters to each other, for he has never met Kalil, only our son Ian. Josh's fourteen year old daughter is the only other family member

at home for now. She is Josh's daughter from a pre-sober, short term relationship that made Josh a single parent. His current wife and younger daughter are away, caring for an ailing relative, and since the wind and the empty plains can accentuate loneliness, Josh is happy to have company, and conversation comes easily.

All day, an unusually chilly July wind has been driving fiercely across the plains. There are no trees here to slow its path. It whips our hair, rattles our ear drums and makes our eyes water even when it's not blowing dust into them. So, we are not eager to leave the safety of the trailer where we drink coffee and tea, and talk with each other and the two chattering parakeets. But the sun is warm and so back into the wind we go for a tour of Josh's outside world.

Within the fenced in yard, where we park our trucks so that the horses don't chew on the upholstery or steering wheels, Josh has built a permanent greenhouse about the size of the trailer he lives in. Outside the door are barrels of green potent-smelling water which Josh explains is organic fertilizer. The shovel- sized green leaves of the comfrey plant are cut and put in the barrel along with enough water to cover them. As the leaves decompose, the minerals are released into the water, thus providing important food for the greenhouse plants when they are watered with this concoction. The greenhouse is full of tomatoes and cilantro, peppers and a variety of flowers, and of course comfrey. Here all is protected not only from the early and late frosts but also from the near constant wind.

Outside the wooden fence, Josh has built a chicken coop and a storage shed for hay and straw. The number of chickens varies from time to time. Eggs of course depend

on the number of chickens but also on the skunk who lives just on the other side of the hill. Skunk discovered the chicken coop this spring and burrowed holes under the foundation for private access to the eggs inside. Josh thought he should probably shoot her until he realized that she had babies to feed, and since the holes she dug were compromising the integrity of the coop foundation, he decided to just leave the door open for her. He just shrugs his shoulders as if to say, “What can you do?”

The round vegetable garden, about thirty feet in diameter, is surrounded with wire fencing. Josh dug the post holes, a job I’m glad wasn’t mine, set the posts, and stretched the fence by hand after he borrowed the tribe’s Ford tractor and two bottom plow to turn the soil. The tractor, purchased through grant funding, is part of an agricultural program that Josh heads up for the tribe. Josh and a coworker write the grants and implement the ideas. They hope to reeducate the local people in traditional agricultural techniques, such as companion planting and permaculture, a theory that promotes planting and growing a variety of perennial food producing plants. Common annuals may then be mixed among the perennials. These approaches to farming mimic the way plants grow in the wild. Some plants protect or shade others that are more delicate. Some plants give off the nutrients that others need and absorb. Also, the plants are organized to efficiently utilize the limited amounts of precipitation and to protect the soil from drying out and hardening. If this happens, then nothing can grow.

With the tractor, Josh is able to plow and prepare garden spots for anyone in the community interested in growing his or her own food. Part of the education program is to inform people of the health benefits of fresh organic vegetables. Diabetes is one of the leading causes of death on the reservation but can usually be avoided with proper diet and

exercise; consequently, a resurgence in home gardening may be able to improve people's health as well as make the community less dependent on government surplus and supplies. With the hoped for increase in home grown food, Josh and his team also plan to reopen the tribal winter storage cellar, a large dirt cellar dug into the side of a hill. Since the cellar is in the earth, the inside temperature remains constant at about 45 degrees. So the vegetables never freeze, yet they remain cool and dry. Earlier in the twentieth century, community members stored their potatoes, carrots, onions and squash for the winter, but when families left their country homes for a house in the government housing projects, most families abandoned gardening and the cellar fell into disuse.

I'm impressed with Josh's family garden. His rows are perfectly symmetrical spiraling out from the center where the salad plants grow all mixed together. As the rows go out, Josh has planted corn and squash, beans and potatoes and here and there some carrots together in raised beds. Everything is healthy and green. We pick enough lettuce, cilantro, and radishes for tonight's salad. It's still too early for the corn and potatoes. On the way back to the house, I ask Josh if he remembers what he used to call Ian. "Yeah, hemoglobin," he says with a smile.

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In the morning, Josh tells us about his recovery. Although he and his family are originally from Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota --at one time Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Standing Rock, Cheyenne River were all connected, collectively known as the Great Sioux Reservation-- he came to Wanblee for the first time in 1985 with four other men, crammed into a 1950s pickup truck. He helped to prepare the Sun Dance grounds that



summer and then participated as a Dancer. The summer of 1985 was the beginning of a two year sober period but then ended with his arrest in 1987. He tells us his version of the shooting incident, of how he couldn't resist the temptation to go down the hill to Jimmy's where he knew they were drinking. He remembers liberally partaking, but he doesn't remember breaking into the house, taking the gun and shooting at his neighbor. He says that his reptile mind was doing the thinking. He shrugs his shoulders. "Relapses are part of recovery."

After a few weeks in the tribal jail, he was released but was asked to leave Wanblee. He went to California where he resumed his old drinking habits. He tells about being drunk and getting arrested for trespassing, about being completely out of money, with no food and no place to go and being given five dollars, and thinking it was enough for a six pack. The reptile mind, he explains, was again doing the thinking. For two more years he lived this way and then came to what he refers to as a "Crossroads of Life." He questioned why he was living the way he was and why he was even in California. He decided to hitchhike away. He stopped in Phoenix, Arizona, where he hung out on the streets and had to decide whether to stay in Phoenix or keep going east. A chance meeting led him to what would eventually be his recovery.

A concerned stranger, an African American whom Josh met during a meal at St. Vincent De Paul's, told him about Native Connections, a residential treatment program there in Phoenix for chemically dependent Native Americans. The first ninety days, Josh says are a "spin dry" program. The recovering alcoholic eats and sleeps at the center, attends classes and meetings, and participates in weekly sweat lodges. After the initial ninety day program, individuals are allowed to remain for up to a year. Still, they

are required to attend two meetings per week, either AA or a sweat lodge, and of course to stay sober. The center provides a support system for the recovering dependents, helps them find employment, training if needed, and eventually a place to live. Josh became a full time employee of the Center for four years.

He says that the success rate of a residential treatment program like Native Connections is about sixty percent. I think this is impressive, but still I wonder what makes it work for some and not for others. And what leads some there in the first place? Chance meetings? Why did one friend, who fasted, sweated, had a wife and family, slip back to alcohol? Why did he become an accomplice in a brutal beating in which one man was stabbed and killed? Why was Inger murdered by a close friend in a drunken argument, and why is it that the perpetrator doesn't even remember committing the crime? What is it about Josh that has enabled him to be alcohol free for the past twenty years while others under similar circumstances could never make it? Instead, those who weren't lucky enough to miss their target or who didn't know when to stop in a fist fight, ended in prison or the cemetery. Are the unlucky ones products of disturbed childhoods, or were they children who lacked significant role models? Or could the answer be that people, who grew up in the country with horses, dogs and other animals and with the space and freedom to roam, develop a strong and determined will? Can we know the answers? Or is it just luck?

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During his ten year stay in Phoenix, Josh became a parent and a single father. He realized that he needed to make more money , so he attended truck driving school, obtained his

commercial license and landed a Teamsters Union driving job that paid higher wages than he had ever earned in his life and allowed him to travel all over America and Canada . He saved money, moved out of his first studio apartment in the gay district, the only place he could find or afford at the time, and into a bigger apartment. But he started to yearn for a simpler life and he dreamed of moving back home to the reservation. During his travels, he regained an earlier interest for raising food and becoming self sufficient. He met a woman who shared these interests and who would later become his wife. Together, they left Phoenix and began the journey home. Along the way, they visited alternative farms and communes, and Josh's enthusiasm for returning home and starting similar programs on the reservation grew. After they found a place to live, Josh started taking botany and agriculture classes at the Lakota college center. He works hard to implement the programs he has started and to keep the funding coming in. He believes that a return to these agricultural ideals will benefit the people both physically and emotionally. Although the progress is slow, he doesn't give up.

On the second day of our visit the wind abates and Josh and Jan are excited to examine and test Josh's new laminated wooden bow. So we shoot arrows into some hay stacks, but every now and then we have to stop and chase away the horses, John Buckinghorse and Mandan Dancer, who want to be close to the activities. John Buckinghorse, a big, friendly, spotted gelding, probably has this name for a reason, but neither Jan nor I venture to find out whether his name matches his actions. Mandan Dancer, a tall and proud looking sorrel, ran in one of the recent Big Foot rides, a horseback trip of over two hundred miles that lasts for two weeks in December. The ride follows the trail through the Badlands from Northern South Dakota to Wounded Knee,

the site where Big Foot and three hundred out of three hundred and fifty of his people were massacred in the snows of December 1890 by General Custer's former regiment, the US 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. Here, where people and horses are the same tribe, the horses have a history too.

After the summer time visit, we talk with Josh through e-mails. He continues to practice with his bow, and in the fall, bow and arrows in hand, he stalks a large doe down by the creek. Unlike 1987, this time his aim is true. He offers tobacco and says a prayer of thanks. Then he skins and butchers her himself, and his family has meat as well as garden vegetables for the long Dakota winter.

For Josh, reptile mind is a memory, a lesson that he keeps close, but for many others it is still a reality. I only hope that whatever it was that allowed Josh to succeed will spread like weeds in a fertile garden.

## Enduring

“A Nation is not defeated until the hearts of its women are on the ground.”  
Cheyenne saying

We weren't starving, but we had more people the summer of 1983 than government supplies, and we started looking at the rancher's cattle with watering mouths; after all, those cattle were grazing on Indian land. But finally, two men brought in a deer in the back of their station wagon. They laid her on the ground in front of the car's headlights, and one of the two brothers asked, "Who's good at skinning?" A man in the small crowd of bystanders said that his wife was pretty good at it, and a young woman in her early twenties stepped out and knelt down by the deer. After she cut around each leg, the neck, and made the long slit along the abdomen from between the hind legs to the circle around the neck, she laid down the knife and never used it again to finish this job. She used her hands like wedges to separate the skin, membranes, and body. Sometimes her fingers were straight and firm making a thin, fine wedge, and sometimes her hands were fists, a more powerful wedge. "Wanna help?" she asked, looking at me. The deer's body warmed my hands from the evening fall chill. By the light of the headlights, the steam rose as we gently removed her skin. "This is the traditional way," she said.

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In the late 1970s, my husband sat with his old friend, Old Guy Dull Knife, at a tribal council meeting. (His name was really Guy, but to distinguish between father and son and grandson, all named Guy, friends and relatives added the adjective.) At the time, Old Guy was in his late seventies. He could still hear well, but spoke and understood limited English. English, however, was the language of the council, and for this reason, Old Guy wanted Jan to stay with him during the meeting, to help him understand the English words. But the council had a rule that no non members could sit in on a meeting, and there was the unspoken problem of Jan's ethnic background. Did they want a white man sitting in on the council? Thus, an argument between Old Guy and the other council members ensued, until Erma walked in. She matter of factly told the council, made up of all men at the time, that Jan's help was necessary for Old Guy's understanding, that it wouldn't be right to conduct a meeting where one of the members couldn't understand the language. Jan absolutely had to stay. And so it was-- Jan stayed. From then on, as long as Old Guy remained a councilman, Jan accompanied him to meetings and no one questioned that again.

I heard about Norma and Erma Rooks well before I ever met them. They were famous in some circles as traditional singers, *wichugalas*. The two sisters, never called each other by name but always by sister, "Sister, are you ready?" Or "Sister, what do you think?" I was surprised at Erma's extra long fingernails. Only movie stars or country singers had nails like that, not country women. The red fingernails matched the long red toe nails that embellished the dirty, dusty, flip flopped feet. Erma talked and laughed without tiring and I could easily see where our friend Boo Boo, whom she had raised, acquired his habits. She talked openly and unabashedly about things that in the rural

Midwestern community where I was raised would only have been broached among the closest of friends, if then. The first time I met her she said with a big smile, “You know I had a breast removed?”

“Well, no. I guess I didn’t know that,” I answered, surprised with this bit of personal information.

“Yeah. I’m ok now though. We had ceremonies and nephew cured me. I used to stuff my bra on that side, but then I figured out that it’s a good place to keep cigarettes.”

She pulled a pack of Marlborough out of her bra, tapped the pack and offered me one. I took it, and we sat on the ground, in the dirt, in the middle of the plains on a mosquito infested summer evening and smoked together. We burned little bundles of dried sage to discourage the mosquitoes from joining us. While Erma talked, I listened, and we watched the big sky turn colors in the west.

That was twenty –six years ago. I don’t smoke anymore, and Erma’s dead, but when I think about Wanblee and those early days, I still hear her voice, her songs and her laughter.

Both Norma and Erma jokingly claimed Jan as one of their “boyfriends.” They were old enough to be his mother. Somehow this made me a mom for Norma’s daughter, according to the daughter anyway. This young woman, who always called me mom both in private and in public, was physically bigger than I, although not quite as old. At a pow-wow, as she dressed for the next set of dances, she called me over.

“Mom, my ears have grown back and I can’t get these earrings in. You need to push the holes open with the earring wire.”

“I don’t know. You have some fat ears. That’s gonna hurt.”

“It’s ok. Just do it.”

I forced one through, and she didn’t even wince. She turned for me to do the next one.

\*

During the summer of 2008, we visited an old friend on Standing Rock Reservation who twenty some years ago, had lived with us during the summers. His fourteen year- old daughter came out to open the wooden gate so that we could drive our truck into the yard where the horses, John Buckinghorse and Mandan Dancer, couldn’t reach in and chew the upholstery off the seats. She led us in to the trailer house and said, “I’ll get my dad,” and with that disappeared down the hall and into her room. Occasionally, when the stories about her dad were particularly funny or perhaps revealed a past that she was only dimly aware of, she would stand at the edge of the living room and listen, retreating again when the laughter died down. That evening, Josh asked her if she wanted to cook the spaghetti, and she said she didn’t. Josh responded with, “Hmm,” and then looked at me, “Do you want to cook the spaghetti?” I wondered at this girl’s shyness or reclusiveness, which was so unlike the behavior of either of my own children, who were always in the middle of things.



The next day, though, when Josh and the others were outside experimenting with Josh's new bow, shooting arrows into hay bales, she came out of her bedroom to talk while I cooked the meat for lunch. I suspected that she missed her step mom, the only mother she knew, and who had been gone for the last month tending an ailing father. She wanted to know about my daughter: how old was she, how did she like home schooling? So, I chatted, and asked her about her own life: how far away was the school, how did she get there and what would she do this summer? When I decided that she was comfortable enough with me, I asked about the fresh cuts on her arm, knowing that she might not answer, that I was stepping close to an issue that might be too personal.

"Oh, I cut off a tattoo," she said.

"You had to cut off a tattoo?"

"Yeah, I fell asleep at some friends' house, and they tattooed me while I was sleeping. I didn't like it, so I cut it off."

I knew that there were some missing pieces of this story, but I didn't ask any more about it. "Jeez that's rugged," I said, and looked again at the cuts on her forearm, and as I imagined her taking a knife to her unwanted tattoo, I was amazed at her capacity for pain and her determination.

\*

Laura stood in the doorway of the log house at the top of the hill, her long black hair disheveled by the constant wind. In her blue jeans and cowboy boots, she was still thin and in good shape for a single mom with four little boys, the youngest old enough to

crawl, but who instead learned to pull himself across the wooden floor with his arms, leaving his legs straight behind him, avoiding splinters in his knees but callusing and chafing his arms and elbows. She stayed there alone with the boys, making sure they had warm beds and something to eat. She stayed there because there was no place else to go at the time. Her parents had been persuaded or perhaps coerced to participate in the Urban Indian Relocation Program back in the 1950s. This program, funded by the US government, encouraged Indians to leave the reservation and to relocate in one of seven major urban areas where they would receive some kind of job training, while at the same time, government funding for the reservations themselves was decreased. The relocation program failed. Neither training nor available housing was adequate or sufficient, nor was there a program in place to help the participants adjust to their new and strange environment. Laura's parents, each from a separate reservation, met in Los Angeles, married and had children, but never adapted to the new conditions. They drank, fought, lost the children to foster care, and died some years later. When Laura spent the summer of 1986 in the primitive one room cabin on the hill, her only possessions were what she could carry in her car, but even so she gave a pair of blue, fully beaded moccasins to my two year old son, Ian. As he and I walked the half mile or so to the Sun Dance grounds, Ian, fascinated at his new appearance, stopped every few steps to sit down and examine his feet. I kept those moccasins.

Laura started taking sweats at the University of California Davis where she met others who were on their way to Wanblee, and eventually she came too. She Sun Danced for four years during the latter part of the 1980s, and now she is dancing again, fulfilling her dead brother's promise to dance, a brother who was killed before he could do it

himself. In two years, she'll complete the promise. In the meantime, she'll gather enough gifts to fill several metal storage trunks: quilts, shawls, useful household items all to give away to the people when she is finished.

After the ceremonies last summer, the nights turned chilly, and we stood with jackets on in Mary's kitchen. Laura's was a long hooded sweatshirt with a stylish Native American design on the back. "That's a really cool jacket," Mary told her. Laura, in keeping with tradition, took it off and gave it to her.

\*

Mary came to Wanblee as a young 20 year old bride, friendly, innocent and naïve. Her father had died when she was small and her mother had been convinced that Mary would be better off at a boarding school. It was soon obvious, when Mary asked, "Do people cook lettuce in soup?" that the boarding school had neglected to teach some basic home skills. For lunch she opened a can of commodity green beans, put them in a bowl and set the bowl on the table. She might have opened a can of peaches too. Her new husband, pretending not to be too hungry, said, "This is good. Thank you. I'm going into town now to check on mom and dad." At his mom's, he would have another lunch: hot soup, fry bread, coffee. Mary was given a sewing machine for a wedding gift, but she didn't know how to use it. The bobbin thread was always tangled and matted. Even the vacuum was a nuisance. She preferred bare floors. Her new mother-in-law, quick to latch on to what she deemed deficiencies, complained to anyone who would listen, chided her new daughter, and stalked about Mary's house peeking into cabinets and rearranging things according to her own dictates.

As young women with small children, excluded from the affairs of men either because of the children or because we were on our moons, our periods, we often gathered at Mary's. Some of us cooked or made fry bread. Others learned new beaded designs, took turns changing diapers, and holding babies. In Midwestern communities during the 70s and 80s, few women breast fed their babies, but here on the reservation, every woman did, and on occasion we nursed each other's children. We drank coffee and smoked cigarettes, commercial ones when we had some, otherwise hand rolled Bull Durham. We reminisced, told jokes and ribald stories. Sometimes we told each other our problems.

I helped Mary with housework. It wasn't just that she wasn't very good at it, it was also because she had so many people in and out, eating, borrowing dishes for ceremonies and towels for sweat baths. Since her husband was a medicine man, many people came to him for help for all sorts of problems. Her place had a constant flow of people, and she always had to oblige, to help when she could. I could wash the dishes in the afternoon, have the kitchen in perfect order, and by next morning all counters and table would be covered again, but Mary never complained about that, at least not to me.

Now, my daughter thinks Mary makes the best fry bread and wants to copy her recipe. On a recent visit, she treated me to expertly grilled wild salmon with lemon and spices. Later, I worked in the kitchen with one of her five daughters, preparing kabobs for the evening's birthday party, where we fed more than thirty people. Mary organized it all, passed out jobs, and entertained us with funny stories and jokes even though earlier in the day, we had stood outside by my truck, in the sun, while she updated me on the things

that we don't like to talk about, the bad things that had happened since I was last there: the illnesses, deaths, divorces and separations.

When Mary wasn't with us in the kitchen, her almost thirty year old daughter, who used to demand attention by walking on the kitchen table while we were eating, told the tales: ghost stories and yarns about her mom.

\*

When I first came to Wanblee, women of the community, especially the older ones, were testing me, testing my sense of humor, my ability to adapt or break, much as they did Mary. I hadn't been on the reservation but a few weeks when I had an opportunity to attend a Yuwipi ceremony. I trusted Jan to tell me the important details of what I should know, the formalities I needed to observe. I suppose he tried. But I suppose as well that I should have done my homework.

When the servers passed out the food, I knew I was not to eat until the head woman had taken her first bite, which then gave me plenty of time to examine the piece of dark, thick skinned meat in my bowl. I also knew that I should eat whatever I was given, so when the old women began, I did too, carefully and with salt as I noticed the others did. I was jolted out of my food contemplation by a woman's loud voice.

"You eat dog?" Not until I looked up and saw everyone looking at me, did I realize that she was talking to me.

I didn't know that people ate dogs, but I said without thinking, "Oh yeah. Jan cooks it all the time. It's his favorite."

Everyone laughed, and another woman said, “He Wasicu Wea Weute Shunka!” (“Hey, that white woman eats dog,” but I didn’t know that either until later.)

I continued thoughtfully with my food.

“Hey. This is Jan’s son.” Again a woman was addressing me and pointing with her lips and face to a young, light haired, sleeping boy lying close to Jan.

“See how light his hair is and his skin. Yeah. Jan has lots of kids. All those kids with light brown hair, those half-breeds, those are his. “

They all looked at me now, expectantly, waiting for some response. In that brief moment as I formulated my answer, I glanced across the room at Jan, who sat looking at me with big eyes, but who was unable to say a word as this was clearly my game.

“Wow. I knew he had a lot of girlfriends, but jeez he was a busy guy, “ I said, even though I was certain, from Jan’s nonaggressive almost backwards behavior during our courtship days, that he didn’t have two to twenty children scattered around the reservation. These women knew Jan well, and wanted to know if I knew him as well as they did.

So amidst loud laughter, they began telling me incredible stories about my husband’s most improbable girlfriends, old women three times his age, big women twice his size. There was no limit to the extremes, and just the ideas and the ridiculous images, made everyone giddy.

Later, when everyone left and Jan and I were alone in the tack room, our temporary living quarters, I had to ask one thing, “So, just what was that meat?”

\*

Soon my first opportunity came to participate in a women's sweat lodge ceremony. I had watched the door for the men's sweats several times, so I knew a little about them. Also, Jan had given me a detailed description of events this time. He warned that the lodge would be completely dark once the door was closed and excruciatingly hot once water was poured on the rocks. But he added that the door would be opened after every four songs. He reminded me that if I was suffering, everyone else would be too.

Thus prepared, I wrapped in my towel, knelt down to crawl in, said the appropriate words and was disoriented by a voice from inside.

“You can't come in here!”

“Oh. Sorry,” I said.

I felt flustered and embarrassed, like a little kid who had just been reprimanded. I probably would have cried if someone hadn't come to my immediate rescue.

A different voice from inside said, “Yeah, she can come in. Come on.”

So, I crawled in. As my eyes adjusted, before the door closed and shut off all outside light, I recognized Ione as the one who had come to my aid, the same woman who had teased and tested me a few nights before during the ceremony, who now stood up for me against one of her own relatives.

During one of the breaks with the door open, Ione told stories to lighten the mood and to introduce herself to me. She told about the different places she had lived. She also told me about all the men she had lived with or been married to. “Yeah, I change men

like some women change their shoes. They get old and worn out, you just get new ones.“

I had heard old stories about Indian women who put their men’s belongings outside the tipi door, which meant that the men should take their things and move on, no questions asked. I liked this traditionally liberated woman, Ione. She’s gone now, but her words still make me laugh. And I’ll repeat these stories for my daughter and nieces so that they may know the possibility of that kind of power.

In those early days, Ione often came for sweats accompanied by her grandson, Roy. He was eight or ten when we first met, also deaf and mute. He played around, doing his own thing, not able to communicate with anyone except for Ione since we didn’t know sign language. I hadn’t seen him in many years, but last summer, he Sun danced. Even though he had grown several feet, gained a bit of a stomach and a small mustache, I recognized him. His face was the same. He recognized Jan and me too. As the dancers filed out on that last day and we, the spectators, lined up to shake their hands, he wrapped his long and sweaty arms around us and smiled, all us of connected by a past, a place, and a feisty grandmother.

As a young girl, I wished I had been born a man. I thought men were stronger, braver, and more capable than women. But after getting to know these Wanblee women and witnessing their capacity for humor and endurance amidst change and harsh circumstances, I changed my mind. I’m proud to be a woman.



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

### We Are Not Dying

“For they were a great people, these old buffalo hunting Sioux, and some day their greatness will reach full flowering again in their children as they walk the hard new road of the white man. “

-Mari Sandoz

Twenty six years ago, I wondered if I was watching a culture die. I remember standing by helplessly as young mothers poured soda, sweetened iced tea, or Kool-Aid into their babies' and toddlers' bottles. Making the children happy, made the parents happy. They didn't want to know that these things might not be good. The children, however, used their bottles for longer than necessary, and by the time they were three or four years old, their front teeth had rotted in the shape of the nipple. Meals for both children and adults were often white bread and bologna, some chips and a pop. Maybe a candy bar too. The government commodity program, which so many people depended on, distributed white flour, Crisco type shortening, canned meats, and macaroni, spaghetti, and white rice. For a people who only a generation ago lived almost exclusively on meat, carbohydrate rich foods turned a strong and lean people into ones who were soft and overweight. Diabetes became the norm, and nutritional education was slow to come. Young men, who at one time could jump on a horse from behind, John Wayne style, could barely lift a leg off the ground to put a foot in the stirrup. Young women, once thin and nimble, now tipped the scales at over two hundred pounds.

Just twenty years ago, the Sun Dancers cut the sacred tree by Pass Creek outside of Wanblee, then hoisted the tree onto their many shoulders and carried it the ten miles to the Sun Dance grounds. They did this without ever letting the tree touch the earth. Last year, they cut the tree in the same place, but they put it on a flat bed semi trailer, and only when they were within a mile of the grounds did they hoist the tree onto their shoulders and carry it the rest of the way.

At the beginning of last year's four day ceremony, I watched the dancers with a critical eye. I noticed the men with their sagging breasts, with bellies that rolled over their Sun Dance skirts. They suffered for the extra weight, and everyone worried about heart attacks and heat strokes. But after four days of fasting and standing in the sun, after the piercings and the pain, at the end of that fourth day, the dancers lined up shoulder to shoulder, spanning the width of the dance circle, three to four rows deep. They carried their staffs. Their hair was long and loose and matted from the wind. With their wounds still fresh and the blood still drying on their chests and abdomens, they danced forward together, stopping four times before reaching the exit gate. Each time they stopped, they raised their staffs and gave a loud and exuberant whoop, and suddenly these weren't the same men. At that moment, they were men capable of great things. They were the warriors of old: Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Spotted Tail, all right there before me. No, they are not dying.

Miracles happen in Wanblee. The transformation that I saw at last year's Sun Dance may well be one, but there are others. Also, during last year's dance, a young man with cerebral palsy made the announcements, sang songs, and introduced the elders before they spoke or prayed. Before his father started dancing, almost ten years ago, this

young man could barely function in normal society. Now, he stands, walks short distances, gives public addresses, and will be attending law school in the next year.

Cathy Young Bear, in an effort to overcome the influences of alcohol, began a spiritual quest in Wanbee. She went on *hanblecheya* for four days and four nights. No food or water for those days. Only prayer and contemplation. Near the beginning of her quest, she had a vision in which a nurse appeared on the hill opposite her fasting place. The woman was the sign for Cathy to go back to school, obtain a nursing degree, and use her skills to help the people. And she did just that, but every year she returned to Wanblee to fast for the four days and nights in order to give thanks and to ask for the continued strength to do the job put before her.

Jake Little Thunder told the story of the medicine man who directed him to gather a certain plant to cure a relative's illness. Jake was dubious because it was the middle of winter, and the plants were all dried, crumbled and hard to find. He finally found a little sprig and brought it back to the Medicine man who then rubbed it in his hands and the plant became green and fresh.

Jake showed us the newspaper articles to confirm the story about a young medicine man from Wanblee who was asked to go to California to pray over a young woman who had been in a coma for too long, and the hospital doctors had given up. The medicine man and his helpers built a sweat lodge nearby, and during the ceremony the holy man disappeared. The other members closed the door and continued singing, and when they opened the door again, he had returned with a plant in his hands. With this plant, the patient revived.

After the Vietnam War, Gerald Standing Soldier came back home to the reservation. He went to war because he grew up thinking that all Lakota young men were warriors and because he had nothing else to do. But while still in Vietnam, he and a friend aimed their automatic weapons into a group of villagers. They fired, and Gerald killed three children that day. When he came back home, he married, but for several years they were without the children they wanted. He tried to forget the three children in Vietnam but instead was tormented and started drinking. He cried during a sweat one night and finally told his story to the old men. They put on a ceremony to find out what could be done, and the spirits told Gerald that because of his carelessness, his thoughtlessness overseas, he had not been allowed to have his own children. But they gave him a way to redeem himself. He had to quit drinking, face his past, and prove that he was responsible enough to take care of the small, *wakanjala*, the sacred beings or children. If so, he would be given another chance: the three Vietnamese children would be born again as his own. He did have children. Three of them. And now as an elder who is nearly blind from diabetes, he is blessed with grandchildren who spend their days with him, sharing food and entertaining him with their constant chatter and play.

Bernard Moves Camp told the story of his grandfather, a holy man, who during a wake for a young woman asked the little girl why she cried so inconsolably. The little girl explained that she was too little to be without her mother. He asked her how old she thought she should be before she could be on her own. She thought about it and answered truthfully. This mother returned to life and lived until the time that her daughter had indicated.

Almost everyone in Wanblee has a personal story about encounters with spirits, ghosts or angels. The boundaries between what might be termed other worldly or supernatural and the “real” world are flexible, transparent, or perhaps even nonexistent. When I went back to Indiana after my first stay in Pine Ridge, a friend asked, “What is it that stands out about the Lakota people?” “For me”, I answered, “it is their complete and unquestioning belief in a spirit world, and in the creator-*Wakan Tanka*.” Even the people who don’t participate in religious activities regularly, those who drink and forget where they are and even who they are, never think to question the existence of God, the Great Spirit, and that other world.

I didn’t go to Pine Ridge twenty-six years ago looking for a religious or spiritual experience; on the contrary, after my studies of St. Thomas Aquinas, Nietzsche, St. Augustine, and Sartre, I developed my own idea about God or lack of God. I decided I didn’t care. Without a doubt then, I was awed when during a *Yuwipi* ceremony, a spirit touched me for the first time. I knew right away that the hand that passed gently under my chin was not human. In which case, I was no longer in a position to deny or even question the existence of a spirit world, and with a spirit world, then logically, I assumed there must be something more.

I returned last summer for the annual Sun Dance and the post dance ceremony, and at that ceremony, the healing spirit who brought the Sundance was present. As the people prayed, the rattles moved about the room. I felt a pressured touch on my arm. I thanked the spirit for doctoring me, and the poke became more intense. Waves of electricity jolted my body, and I grabbed my daughter’s leg for comfort. Somehow, I knew then, that I had procrastinated long enough and that when I returned home, I needed

to see a doctor about the suspicious lesion on my forearm. Skin cancer, yes, but it hadn't spread.

Native peoples say that each tipi pole represents a different path to God. Each one starts on the ground at a different spot, but each one comes to the center at the same time. Black Elk, a traditional Lakota healer and spiritual leader, was also a deacon in the Catholic Church. Students asked Dr. Joseph Brown, who spent many years with Black Elk, how he could reconcile the two paths. Dr. Brown simply answered that Black Elk had the spiritual capacity to do both. While I don't presume to be close to the same spiritual level as Black Elk, I too have joined the Catholic Church, and the decision to do so stems from my stay on Pine Ridge. The Church provides the tradition and the discipline to keep me on a path, but I return to Pine Ridge periodically like a grown child returns to her parents' home. It is the base, and the center.

I have told my children these stories and introduced them to these beliefs. As babies still in the womb, they listened to the drums and singing of ceremonies. They heard the rattles, felt the vibrations. An old friend there recently said, "It is good that you lived here and taught your children these ways, for even though they haven't always grown up here, they are part of here. They have roots here." I have roots there as well.

My family and I will return to Wanblee again this summer. Others will return too. Laura will come back from Oklahoma. Peter and Nghia from California. Sku Sku from Idaho. New ones whom we have yet to meet. Our daughter will go on her first *hanblecheya*, and I will be able to connect again with my old friends, with the land, the culture and the community. Wanblee is a place for renewal, a place to renew one's faith

in humanity, in religious practices and in a God who may go by many names even though they are one.

Lakota culture is neither dead nor dying, changing perhaps but still alive. I regret that many art collectors, anthropologists, and historians mistakenly lament the Indian's loss of art, their loss of culture and tradition. For after standing just outside the dance circle last summer with the other spectators while the dancers passed their eagle wings and sage bundles over our heads and blessed us with prayers for a healthy life, blessed even those of us whose ancestors had brought them blankets infected with disease, I know that their capacity for forgiveness, for change, for transformations and miracles is great and that the words of Mari Sandoz are true.

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## APPENDIX A



Continuing Education & Sponsored Programs  
1401 Presque Isle Avenue  
Marquette, MI 49855-5325

June 16, 2008

TO: Rochelle Dale  
English

FROM: Cynthia A. Prosen, Ph.D.  
Dean of Graduate Studies & Research

RE: Human Subjects Proposal #HS08-193  
"Return to the Reservation"

The Human Subjects Research Review Committee has reviewed your proposal and has given it final approval. To maintain permission from the Federal government to use human subjects in research, certain reporting processes are required. As the principal investigator, you are required to:

- A. Include the statement "Approved by HSRRC: Project # (listed above) on all research materials you distribute, as well as on any correspondence concerning this project.
- B. Provide the Human Subjects Research Committee letters from the agency(ies) where the research will take place within 14 days of the receipt of this letter. Letters from agencies should be submitted if the research is being done in (a) a hospital, in which case you will need a letter from the hospital administrator; (b) a school district, in which case you will need a letter from the superintendent, as well as the principal of the school where the research will be done; or (c) a facility that has its own Institutional Review Board, in which case you will need a letter from the chair of that board.
- C. Report to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee any deviations from the methods and procedures outlined in your original protocol. If you find that modifications of methods or procedures are necessary, please report these to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee before proceeding with data collection.
- D. Submit progress reports on your project every 12 months. You should report how many subjects have participated in the project and verify that you are following the methods and procedures outlined in your approved protocol.
- E. Report to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee that your project has been completed. You are required to provide a short progress report to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee in which you provide information about your subjects, procedures to ensure confidentiality/anonymity of subjects, and the final disposition of records obtained as part of the research (see Section II.C.7.c).
- F. Submit renewal of your project to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee if the project extends beyond three years from the date of approval.

It is your responsibility to seek renewal if you wish to continue with a three-year permit. At that time, you will complete (D) or (E), depending on the status of your project.

kjm

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